

**Volume 2: Comprising Five Professional Practice Reports**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

Volume 2 of this thesis comprises of five professional practice reports which aim to reflect a broad range of interests for the work of Educational Psychologists (EPs). The first of the reports, which focuses on the evaluation of a specialist setting that caters for the complex needs of children and young people, was negotiated as a research project with a school for complex needs in the Local Authority (LA) where I am currently employed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). The remaining four reports all resulted from individual casework and discuss work which was negotiated and undertaken in schools or focus on broader issues relevant to EP practice. In addition, the first professional practice report has an supplementary report that discusses personal reflections on engagement in a Web based discussion group set up as part of the second year training program by the University. The reports as a whole reflect a range of areas of interest and research methodologies. The first professional practice report uses a qualitative design to explore the question of who goes to complex needs schools. The second report discusses the literature relating to the work of Educational Psychologists and other professionals engaging with families from minority ethnic backgrounds and uses this to explore some of the issues in the context of reflections on personal practice. The third report is a case study focusing on the setting up and evaluation of a circle of friends intervention in a high school setting and uses a mixture of qualitative and quantitative evidence. Report four discusses the use of a Self-Organised Learning approach to reflection to develop personal practice in the management of meetings with parents and school staff. The final report discusses the planning, implementation and evaluation of a program based on cognitive behaviour therapy to support year 11 pupils cope with exam anxiety.

## **Introductory Chapter**

The work contained within this volume forms the second of two distinct volumes which combine to meet the assessed written requirements of the Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology. Volume 2 comprises five Professional Practice Reports (PPRs) covering a range of experiences gathered during years two and three of the doctoral training while employed in a Local Authority (LA) Educational Psychology Service (EPS).

The LA is located in the north of England and serves a mixed rural and urban community. The geographical area where the schools are located that I supported is in the north of the authority and comprises a conurbation of ex-industrial towns. There is a large Pakistani ethnic community in the area and high levels of deprivation. In addition to mainstream school provision the authority also has a number of all age special schools.

The EPS is part of the Psychology and Specialist Outreach Service (PASO) which includes a number of other teams including: Autism outreach; Portage; and Child and Family Consultation. The EPS works on a time allocation basis in schools and in addition there is time set aside for community related work and Early Years work. Each school, in addition to their allocated time, have a termly planning and consultation meeting at which case work and other work for the term is negotiated. The first PPR is an evaluation of a specialist setting that caters for complex needs of children and young people. PPR2 resulted from work with an Early Years Advice for statutory assessment. PPR 3 and 5 were the outcome of casework and the fourth PPR related to work at school action plus in schools. Below is a brief overview of each PPR.



PPR 1 discusses a qualitative study which involved five interviewees representing a range of perspectives on the question of 'Who goes to complex needs schools?' This work arose from the re-designated of a local school for moderate learning difficulties as provision for children with complex needs because anecdotally this may lead to some tensions, both within schools themselves, and between them and others within the authority. It appears that this may be because of views held by school staff about the nature and purpose of the provision that differs from the views held within the authority more widely and also the perceptions of parents. The interviews were conducted with two members of staff from the complex needs school (a teacher and a member of the senior management team), two Special Educational Needs co-ordinators from local primary schools and an LA Special Educational Needs Administration officer.

PPR2 arose from a piece of Early Years work with a child with profound and complex needs from a Pakistani minority ethnic background. The child's mother, a single parent, spoke very little English so when I visited her at home I arranged a joint visit with a Portage worker who was already involved with the child and who spoke Punjabi, the mother's first language. However, through this experience I was aware of many limitations in the process which I felt were worth exploring through this practice report. The report takes the form of a critical literature review followed by critical reflections on my own work in this case in relation to the literature.

PPR3 reports on the setting up of a circle of friends intervention that resulted from a discussion at an annual review for a boy with a Statement of Special Educational Needs attending a mainstream high school. The school were raising concerns about his behaviour in class and the disruption it was causing. The challenges of setting up, running and evaluating this type of intervention in a high school setting when working as an individual Educational

Psychologist and the constraints of conducting research in the real world are discussed. In addition there is a discussion about attribution theory and how this might be used as a framework for conducting further research in this area and the value of qualitative methods in making sense of the complex interacting factors that contribute to difficulties experienced by pupils in schools and the most effective approaches to tackling these.

PPR4 discusses the use of Self-Organised Learning to structure meetings in school and to discuss the author's use of S-OL to reflect on the process of developing his own practice in relation to managing these meetings involving parents, teachers and SENCos. Through the use of a cycle of planned and reviewed Personal Learning Contracts the aim was to deepen personal insight into the processes taking place in these meetings and as a result increase personal effectiveness. Self-Organised Learning was developed by Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991). It offers a psychological framework for developing reflection on action that engages the learner in a learning conversation, initially with a coach but with the aim of increasing internalisation and personal control of the learning process by the learner themselves. There is, however, to date little discussion of the use of S-OL in the research literature.

PPR5 resulted from casework with a high school that I support. An annual review for a young man in Year 11 with a statement of Special Educational Needs for Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties suggested that he was experiencing anxiety around exams. He had been previously invited to meet with me in school and at the Child and Family Consultation Centre where I am employed but had not been willing to engage. As a result it was decided to offer a group session in school to be presented as 'Strategies for Success'; this would be offered to other Year 11 pupils who were experiencing exam anxiety as well as this pupil, thus avoiding singling him out for specific attention. A programme was then developed using

cognitive behaviour therapy approaches. The report is an evaluation of the implementation and evaluation of this programme.

This volume of professional practice reports has provided an opportunity for reflection on a range of work that has supported deep and meaningful learning around issues and contexts of Educational Psychology practice. As a whole, they represent a cross section of the diverse work that EPs are engaged in with children and young people to support their successful inclusion and achievement in school.

# **Professional Practice Report 1**

## **Who Goes to Complex Needs Schools? A Study of the Views of Local Authority and School Staff**

### **Abstract**

There appears to be a degree of ambiguity about the pupils that schools originally designated for pupils with moderate learning difficulties should now cater for; some have changed their designation to schools for children with complex needs to reflect this. This paper attempts to explore this issue by looking at the perspectives of a range of people who hold a professional view; they were asked to discuss the meaning of the term complex needs and more specifically its meaning in relation to the needs of pupils attending a complex needs school, Newhaven (pseudonym). The school was opened two years ago following the amalgamation of two former schools that had been designated provision for pupils with moderate learning difficulties.

The paper begins by looking at the background development of special needs education in this country since the Second World War and the successive policies and legislation that have culminated in the current position; it then turns to look at some definitions of the term complex needs in the literature. Next the current study is described: this involved five interviewees; two from the school for children with complex needs; two Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCo's) from local mainstream schools; and a Local Authority Statementing officer. The results are discussed with reference to the literature relating to themes that emerged from the interviews. In conclusion areas for future research are suggested.

## **Introduction**

There appears to be some ambiguity in many local authorities regarding the pupil population that schools historically catering for children with moderate learning difficulties should now provide for (for example: Cambridge Education, 2008; Male and Rayner, 2007). Male and Rayner (2007) report that 39% of schools in their survey had multiple designations such as ‘complex learning difficulties or combined MLD/SLD/PMLD/ASD in various combinations’ (p.147) whereas in a previous survey carried out in 1996 all schools contacted were officially designated SLD schools. It seems likely, given this change in designation of SLD schools and the change in designation of Newhaven School, that some former MLD schools have also been re-designated as provision for children with complex needs. Anecdotally this may lead to some tensions, both within schools themselves, and between them and others within the authority: this may be because of views held by school staff about the nature and purpose of the provision that differs from the views held within the authority more widely and also the perceptions of parents. The purpose of this study was to examine those perceived tensions and differences of opinion by interviewing people representing different voices in the debate in relation to one particular school, Newhaven School, with the aim of surfacing some of the contributing themes and issues. Additionally the study aimed to highlight possible issues of equality in relation to referral routes which might be promoting the access to provision and inclusion of certain groups of pupils relative to others.

## **Background**

To understand the current position it is important to have some understanding of historical contexts that have shaped it and of which it represents a phase of progression, rather than a fixed end or apotheosis. However, a detailed history of the development of the education system and special needs education would be inappropriate here; I wish to briefly outline how special needs education has evolved since the Second World War and as a result of successive

legislation and government agendas has arrived at its current configuration. I will go on to discuss the school and local authority context which are the focus of this study followed by some definitions of complex needs, before discussing the study itself in more detail.

The 1944 Education Act introduced a range of different special schools that catered for the needs of children according to ten categories of handicap (Thomas, Walker and Webb 1998). Muncey and Palmer (1995, p.125) suggest that: 'schools were there to cure their pupils, or care for them away from the rigours and pressures of mainstream education.' The decision about which was the appropriate provision required a medical examination and report, thus an approach characterized by individual scrutiny and pathology pertained. Armstrong (2003, p.78) picks up on this point and suggests that the categorizations of the 1944 Act represent a continuation of the pre war eugenics movement, however, he also identifies that there are fundamental differences, a radical break from the past, embodied in the 1944 Act:

'The post- 1945 political ideal was centrally concerned with extending both opportunities and citizenship to people who in the past had been marginalised and disadvantaged within their own society. Thus, post-war special education, far from enacting a policy of exclusion through the rapidly expanding special school sector, actually represented an attempt to engineer an inclusive society in which the needs of all citizens were addressed through schools which were designed to meet their needs.'

It is also helpful to set the introduction of special schools within the context of a mainstream system which identified three categories of school provision: grammar, technical and secondary modern, where selection was achieved by means of the 11 plus exam.

The special education system introduced as a result of the 1944 Act remained largely unchanged until the 1981 Education Act which incorporated in legislation recommendations made by the Warnock Committee in their 1978 Report: they argued for the abandoning of medically based categories on the grounds that they believed 'categories confused what special education is by promoting the idea that all children in the same category have similar

educational needs' (Norwich, 1990, p.8). In addition many children suffer from more than one disability which under the post war system presented difficulties in categorisation that then effected school provision. Norwich (1990) suggests that although the force of argument against categorisations was a strong one, it did not provide any easy alternatives and although the 1981 Education Act did reduce the number of categories and introduced the concept of a continuum of special educational needs, categories remain, albeit in a different guise. He goes on to suggest that: 'To argue that a category like educationally subnormal is imprecise and then to substitute for it an even less clearly defined concept of 'moderate learning difficulties' is a strange form of reasoning' (Norwich, 1990, p.9). Of course one might well argue that losing the pejorative label 'subnormal' is a good enough reason alone, but the point being made relates to the administrative role of categories or labels and the way that they are used to divide children and young people into those who are included by the definition and those who are not and to consequently identify provision that is deemed appropriate to meet this 'different' educational need.

The period since the 1981 Education Act saw a reorganisation of special needs schools into a smaller range of categories including schools for moderate learning difficulties (MLD), severe and profound, multiple learning difficulties (S/PMLD), and schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). This picture has remained representative of many local authorities, with some variation, through the 1980's and 1990's. In addition, alongside the reorganisation of categories, the 1981 Act also introduced the principal of integration, or inclusion, of pupils with special educational needs into their local mainstream school and this principal has increasingly gained ground in the education agenda with implications for both mainstream and special schools alike. Male and Rayner (2007, p.145) identify that 'between 1986 and 1991, for example, the number of pupils with Statements of SEN placed in

mainstream schools rose from 35,800 to 70,900 while, conversely, between 1981 and 1991 the number of special schools in England and Wales fell from 1530 to 1393.' Croll and Moses (2000) state that 'in 1982, 1.72% of pupils were in special schools while in 1996 this proportion was 1.40%' (p.179). They go on to suggest that although this decrease is small in absolute terms it does represent nearly a quarter of the special school population. Perhaps these figures are partially explained by the general trend after the 1981 Education Act for pupil's whose primary special need was a sensory or physical disability to be provided for in mainstream schools (Croll and Moses, 2000). The subsequent introduction of the SEN Code of Practice in 1994 and successive legislation (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995; Education Act 1996; SEN and Disability Act 2001; Code of Practice 2001, DfES), and the right to appeal to the SEN tribunal, has strengthened the rights of parents of children with statements to express a preference in relation to the school that they would like their child to attend, either special or mainstream; this has further increased the numbers of pupils going to mainstream school. In addition, the 2001 Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) states that 'LEAs must comply with a parental preference unless the school is unsuitable to the child's age, ability, aptitude or efficient education of the other children with whom the child would be educated, or with the efficient use of resources.' DfES (2001, p.61). A number of local authorities have completely re-organised their provision for pupils with SEN and in some cases greatly reduced the number of special school places, for example Norwich (1997, cited in Croll and Moses, 2000, p.179) shows that children in one London borough were eight times as likely to be in a special school as children in another London Borough. Thus we arrive at the current position which appears to be characterised in many local authorities by an increasing diversity of placements for pupils with special needs and many overlaps in the pupils provided for by different schools; this is predominantly a result of parents exercising



their right to select a preferred school and the increase in resourced mainstream schools offering additional specialist provision (e.g. Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Bagley and Woods, 1998).

The increasing inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties in their mainstream schools (Hornby, 1999; Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Baker, 2007) has inevitably had an impact on special schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties, who find themselves providing for an increasingly complex range of pupils, resulting in the re-designation of some schools as provision for pupils with complex needs (Male, 2007).

### **The School and Local Authority Context**

Newhaven School is a community special school; on their website (2008) they describe themselves as a provision for children with complex needs, they take children aged 5 to 16 and there are 170 pupils on role. In the school's Ofsted report of June 2008, the school is described as follows:

‘This very large special school changed its designation and doubled in size in January 2007 following amalgamation with another school. The majority of pupils have a moderate learning difficulty combined with other special needs such as behavioural difficulties or autistic spectrum disorders’ Ofsted (2008, p.3).

The school is located in the northern area of an LA in Northern England. The authorities' children's services have recently undergone organisational change in line with *Every Child Matters* (2003) and *Strategies for SEN: Removing Barriers to Achievement* (2004). This resulted in the establishment in April 2006 of the Children and Young People's Service (ChYPS). In April 2008 a report was published by Cambridge Education following a review of SEN provision in the borough which they conducted between January and March 2008.

There were a number of different issues highlighted by this review, but the following is of particular relevance to this report:

‘Head teachers require clarification on the role of resourced provision and want admissions guidelines to clearly demonstrate the distinction between what a resourced provision can be expected to provide as opposed to a special school. At present there is no clear rationale that distinguishes what a resourced provision can offer that is different from a special school’... ‘Special school head teachers endorsed the need for clarification on admissions guidelines’ Cambridge Education (2008, p16).

This brings us to a consideration of the term ‘complex needs’ which has come to be used, as in this instance, to describe pupils provided for by a number of schools formerly designated as schools for moderate learning difficulties. How is this term understood by Newhaven School, mainstream schools, and relevant Local Authority staff? Before looking at the local context in detail, through the results of the research carried out for this study, it is important to get some perspective of the current use of the term ‘complex needs’ as it is described in the literature.

### **Definitions of Complex Needs**

The term ‘complex needs’ appears to have a broad usage in relation to a diverse range of individuals and contexts. For example, Hewitt-Taylor (2005) uses the term to discuss children with high dependency medical needs, while Leisner (2001) uses ‘complex needs’ to describe children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Buckroyd and Flitton (2004, p.135) suggest that ‘complex needs’ is a term that can cover a wide range of conditions including ‘slow learner’, ‘learning impeded by emotional factors’ and ‘developmentally delayed’. Rosengard, Laing, Ridley and Hunter (2007) in reviewing the literature on ‘complex needs’ comment that there are many different terms linked with ‘multiple’ and ‘complex’ needs, but that there is a lack of consensus on the meaning of these various terms: ‘Often there was an assumption that complex and/or multiple needs are a matter of fact and can be understood without definition, and a strong thread through the literature was that the terms are used interchangeably’ (p.6).

Rankin and Regan (2004) prefer to think of complex needs in terms of a framework for response rather than a description of an individual: 'each individual with complex needs has a unique interaction between their health and social care needs and requires a personalised response from services' (p.1).

It appears then that the term 'complex needs' has emerged within the health and social care sectors as a response to the needs of individuals in an attempt to shift the focus away from a standard response to a presenting issue; it instead suggests a move towards a more holistic understanding that takes account of the interacting factors in an individual's life that require services to respond in a reflexive manner. To an extent its adoption by the education system can be seen as an erosion of the taxonomic approach that had originated in the eugenics movement, and continued to dominate special education after the 1944 Act. That erosion had begun when the Warnock Commission recommended the move away from the previous 10 categories of special educational need, replacing it with the idea of a continuum of special educational needs while still retaining categories for those pupils with the greatest levels of need.

### **Study Aims, Methods and design**

For the purpose of this Professional Practice Report I wanted to sample a range of current views around my focus of interest. I decided that in order to do this I would interview a number of people whose positions and opinions seemed likely to reflect this range. The interview questions were therefore designed to explore the interviewee's perceptions about the needs of children attending a school for complex needs from a number of different angles (see appendix 1).

### *The Sample*

In the interests of manageability, within the confining parameters of the report, a maximum of five interviews was decided upon. The sample, in essence, is purposive in that the principal of selection is my own judgment of typicality of interest (Robson, 2002); the intention here is not to generalise from sample to population but rather, in line with a grounded theory approach, to surface themes within the discourse. Rubin and Rubin (1995) advise the need to aim for balance in the choice of interviewees to represent different positions. Therefore approaches to the following people were made to request their involvement: the Head teacher of the school, who in-turn was to decide upon a member of the school's senior management team and a member of the teaching staff to be interviewed; the Local Authority Special Educational Needs Administrative Officer for the school; a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) from a local primary school, which has had children transfer to Newhaven school recently, and a SENCo from a school where pupils rarely transfer to this or other special schools (the latter two were identified by discussions with colleagues in the Educational Psychology Service). All those approached were contacted by telephone or e-mail and all agreed to be interviewed. If the remit of the report were larger then it would have been preferable to involve a larger and more varied sample, however, in this instance, it was not possible. Additionally, access to the staff in the school had to be mediated via the head teacher and this may have implications with regard to the representative nature of the views expressed in those interviews.

### *Interviews: Rationale*

A semi structured interview approach was decided upon because I wanted to have some structure to support the process that still allowed scope for the respondents to speak with

relative freedom. Drever (1995) suggests that semi-structured interviews usually assume that the two parties share a common frame of reference; the structure that the interviewer creates should make sense to the other person. In addition, although the interviewer develops a set of questions in advance of the interview they are free to modify the order depending on what seems appropriate as the interview progresses, Robson (2002). The interviews were piloted with a SENCo from another school and some changes were made as a result of this.

### *Structure*

Rubin and Rubin (1995) discuss interviews in relation to stages that are passed through; these can be identified by their emotional intensity and intellectual challenge. In order to achieve a natural and harmonious flow to the interaction, careful structuring of the interview needs to be considered in advance. In essence, most interviews comprise of an initial preamble, initial warm-up questions, main questions (with prompts and probes), concluding questions and parting thanks to respondents for taking part (Cohen and Manion, 2000; Drever, 1995; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). These considerations were taken into account in the construction of the interview schedule (see appendix 1).

### *Question Selection and Critique*

The main problem when using pre-determined questions, in this instance, is that the interviewees are a disparate group with different knowledge and experience which is the reason they were identified; however this has implications for the wording and scope of the questions. For example questions 6 and 7 (see appendix 1), which asked about staff and resources at Newhaven School, presented difficulties for the SEN Stateminting officer because they required some understanding of educational practice about which she had both a limited knowledge and different perspective. Another question which, on reflection,

evidenced a certain lack of clarity of meaning was question 1 (see appendix 1): this asked about the sort of difficulties covered by the term complex needs. The problem was that the interviewees had already been cued into this in relation to Newhaven School in the preamble; they therefore tended to be thinking about the needs of those pupils, rather than the kind of needs that they might associate with the term more generally. As a result this question tended to require more probing and clarification during the interviews in order to elicit a response that related to it specifically; this has implications for the validity of the data because my intention had been to find out what the interviewee's understood by the term and then look at how they saw it in relation to children at Newhaven School and children in resourced provision and how far this corresponded or differed.

### *Ethical Considerations*

In relation to the ethical considerations of conducting interviews and right to anonymity, I explained clearly in the preamble to the interview questions (see appendix 1) that all the interview data would be written up anonymously, what the intended purpose of the interviews was, and I stated that I would send a copy of the research to each interviewee once completed.

I audio recorded all the interviews with the interviewees permission and subsequently transcribed them in full; the audio recordings were then deleted. In the transcriptions, the examples used in appendix 2 and in the body of the text, all original names have been removed and replaced by pseudonyms. Direct quotes used to exemplify themes contained in appendix 2 have not been linked in any way to the interviewee. Direct reference to the role of interviewees has only been used where this is felt to be relevant to an understanding of different perspectives (e.g. in tables 1,2,3,4 and 5). In addition, the names of all interviewees have been kept confidential by the researcher.

## Results

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews were transcribed in full and content analysed in terms of emergent categories and themes, on one hand, and the research questions on the other. The themes have been grouped under a number of broad headings which appear to make sense and provide structure to the data presentation; it is important, however, to acknowledge that these are researcher imposed groupings, it is a version of reality presented from a particular perspective (Burr, 1995).

### *Definitions of Complex Needs and Interviewee Knowledge about Provision*

The interviewees were initially asked what sort of difficulties they thought the term complex needs covered; their responses are summarised in the table below:

Interviewee	Learning difficulty	Speech/ language difficulty	Social/ emotional difficulty	Behaviour difficulty	Physical difficulty	Medical needs	Sensory impairment	Psychiatric needs
1(SENCo)	X			X	X			X
2 (SENCo)	X		X			X		
3(Statementing officer)	X					X		
4(Newhaven staff member)	X	X	X	X				
5(Newhaven staff member)	X	X		X	X			

**Table 1. Definitions of what is covered by the term ‘complex needs’.**

When asked ‘What are the particular complex needs that you think Newhaven School provides for?’ their responses can be summarised as follows:

Interviewee	Learning difficulty	Speech/ language difficulty	Social/ emotional difficulty	Behaviour difficulty	Physical difficulty	Medical needs	Sensory impairment	Psychiatric needs
1(SENCo)	X	X	X		X			
2 (SENCo)	X	X	X	X				
3(Statementing officer)	X	X	X		X	X	X	
4(Newhaven staff member)	X	X	X	X	X			
5(Newhaven staff member)	X	X		X				

**Table 2. Perceptions of ‘complex needs’ provided for by Newhaven School.**

Later the interviewees were asked ‘are there any particular complex needs that you think Newhaven school does not provide for?’ again their responses are summarised below:

Interviewee	Extreme behaviour difficulty	Psychiatric needs	Autistic spectrum – more extreme needs	Pupils with high care needs	Pupils needing sensory/exploratory play and 1:1 support
1(SENCo)	X	X			
2(SENCo)				X	
3(Statementing officer)	X				
4(Newhaven staff member)	X		X		
5(Newhaven staff member)					X

**Table 3: Perceptions of ‘complex needs’ not provided for by Newhaven School.**

### *Definitions of Complex Needs*

Given the lack of consensus around the meaning of complex needs identified in the literature it is not surprising that there was also some variation in the responses of the interviewees (see



table 1). The main point of agreement was that it involved a learning difficulty and one or more additional needs; for example one interviewee talked about a ‘menu of additional needs’ in addition to a learning difficulty (see appendix 2, paragraph 1.1). In addition, medical needs were discussed by two interviewees while another person saw the term as having a very broad meaning (see appendix 2, paragraph 1.2).

#### *Provision at Newhaven School*

Again there is a range of perceptions about the needs of children that Newhaven provides for; however, there appears to be a greater consensus compared to the first question and they can be seen to coalesce around learning, speech and language and social and emotional/ behaviour needs (see table 2). In addition, physical difficulties were mentioned by three of the interviewee’s.

#### *Degree of Difficulty*

By analysing the interviewee responses in a slightly different way, however, focusing on the perceived *degree* of difficulty as opposed to the *type* of difficulties then there appears to be a greater consensus around the meaning of complex needs generally and the needs of pupils at Newhaven specifically. In relation to the question about complex needs the following words and phrases were used:

Phrase	Interviewee 1 (SENCo)	Interviewee 2 (SENCo)	Interviewee 3 (Statementing officer)	Interviewee 4 (Newhaven member of staff)	Interviewee 5 (Newhaven staff member)
‘Extreme difficulties’	X				
‘Huge adaptations’	X				
‘Extremely violent’	X				
‘Children with a lot of complex needs’			X		
‘Learning much slower’		X			
‘Little in the way of social development and other areas of development’		X			
‘[the term] complex needs well that just leaves you open to everything’					X

**Table 4. Phrases used in relation to the question about complex needs.**

In discussing the needs of pupils at Newhaven these words and phrases were used:

Phrase	Interviewee 1 (SENCo)	Interviewee 2 (SENCo)	Interviewee 3 (Statementing officer)	Interviewee 4 (Newhaven staff member)	Interviewee 5 (Newhaven staff member)
‘Severe difficulties’	X				
‘Needs more extreme’	X				
‘You’d expect the children that go to Newhaven would have more than one [area of] need’			X		
‘...more extreme complex needs that mainstream have probably tried very hard to accommodate’				X	
‘Much more complex: extremely complex with some quite extreme behaviour, not naughty but bizarre behaviour’				X	
‘Newhaven is for more moderate learning needs’		X			
‘Very complex needs’					X

**Table 5. Phrases used in discussing the needs of pupils at Newhaven.**

There is one exception here, however, to the general consensus around a severity of need: interviewee 2 seems to be expressing a view that the school is for children with less severe needs.

#### *Pupils Who's Needs Cannot Be Met at Newhaven*

The pupils identified by this question seemed to fall into three main categories: extreme behaviour difficulties which might be related to psychiatric needs, pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder who had the greatest level of impairment, and pupils with high care and support needs (see appendix 2, paragraph 2.1).

#### *The Impact of Inclusion*

This was a theme that emerged from analysing the interview transcriptions: it was not a direct interview question. Some of the interviewees talked about a changing profile of pupils being provided for at Newhaven towards more complex needs because of inclusion in mainstream schools of pupils who only experienced difficulties in the area of learning (see appendix 2, paragraph 3.1). Additionally there was a theme that emerged regarding pupils attending mainstream schools who had similar needs to pupils at Newhaven but who were then transferring to Newhaven at various points, particularly around key transition times e.g. junior school to high school (see appendix 2, paragraph 3.2).

Themes that emerged from the interviews and that appear to be linked in with the issue of inclusion were parental preferences, parental perceptions and transition.

### *Parental preferences and perceptions*

A picture of the provision for pupils with complex needs emerged from the discussions which could be described as both fluid and heterogeneous. This appeared to be a result of parental preference regarding where their child was educated, which resulted in children with similar needs accessing different provision. Some of the factors that were identified as being important for parents when making these decisions were around their perceptions of different schools and the level of support that they perceived their child would receive. For example, one interviewee discussed parents wanting a mainstream placement for their child because they would get 1:1 support (see appendix 2, paragraph 4.1). Conversely another interviewee identified that some children whose needs could be met in mainstream were, in fact, in special school because that was what the parents had requested (see appendix 2, paragraph 4.2).

In other situations identified, children were going to a mainstream school and then later transferring to Newhaven School because they had experienced difficulties for one reason or another. For example, an instance was given of a pupil who had been in mainstream school but who had not been able to access all the building in his wheelchair and therefore had been limited in his social inclusion (see appendix 2, paragraph 4.3).

Parental perceptions about the needs of the children that a school provided for, and the impact of their child being labelled, tended to be viewed as playing a big part in their decision making; in some instances parents were seen to identify their own child's needs as less severe than those of other children and preferred their child to go to Newhaven rather than the school for S/PMLD because of this (see appendix 2, paragraph 4.4). In relation to the issue of labelling, another interviewee felt that parents were choosing mainstream school so that their child would be included more fully in the local community (see appendix 2, paragraph 4.5).

As a result of these differing motivations, parental preference appears to be playing a part in shaping the demographic picture in both special and mainstream schools (see appendix 2, paragraph 4.6). One of the interviewees summed the situation as follows:

‘At the end of the day you know its parent’s choice.’

### *Transition*

Two themes emerged around the issue of transition which seem to be important factors in determining the likelihood of a child transferring to Newhaven: the first was differences in mainstream schools’ commitment to inclusion, and the second was the current school’s perceptions of the following educational phase’s ability to meet pupil’s needs. On the theme of school’s commitment to inclusion, some of the interviewees discussed examples that they knew of where schools had pushed for a child to go to Newhaven (see appendix 2, paragraph 5.1); one interviewee felt that there were children who were going there at transition who didn’t need to (see appendix 2, paragraph 5.2). In relation to the ability of the next phase of education to meet the pupil’s needs it appeared that this related to children transferring from infant to junior and from junior to high school (see appendix 2, paragraph 5.3).

### *Challenging Behaviour*

There was a feeling expressed by the interviewee’s who did not work at Newhaven that the school would be better able to cope with behaviour difficulties than mainstream schools because of the smaller class sizes, although one interviewee didn’t feel that pupils with ‘extreme behaviour’ difficulties should not go to Newhaven. The staff within the school felt that they were providing for an increasing number of pupils with behaviour difficulties and that this had implications for the identity of the school (see appendix 2, paragraph 6.1)

### *Failure of Mainstream Schools to meet Pupils Needs/ Standards Agenda/ Staff Skills In Mainstream*

The theme of pupils 'failing' in mainstream schools was raised by a number of the interviewees and this was linked to a number of different issues, but particularly the issue of the 'standards agenda' (league tables, Ofsted etc.) and the skills of staff to meet the needs of SEN pupils. The standards agenda was perceived to run contrary to the needs of individual pupils, particularly where those needs were non academic (see appendix 2, paragraph 7.1). One interviewee discussed what she thought the difference in the focus of the curriculum at Newhaven was and contrasted it with a results focused mainstream curriculum (see appendix 2, paragraph 7.2).

Staff working in mainstream schools were seen to have difficulties meeting the needs of SEN pupils because of lack of skills and experience in differentiation and understanding the needs of particular conditions, but also because of the demands of balancing the needs of individuals with the rest of the class. This point was discussed by two of the interviewees, a mainstream SENCo and member of staff from Newhaven (see appendix 2, paragraph 7.3).

Often the responsibility for meeting the needs of SEN children was observed to be picked up by support staff; this was felt to be problematic because they had less training and status although the demands of the role were perceived to be high (see appendix 2, paragraph 7.4).

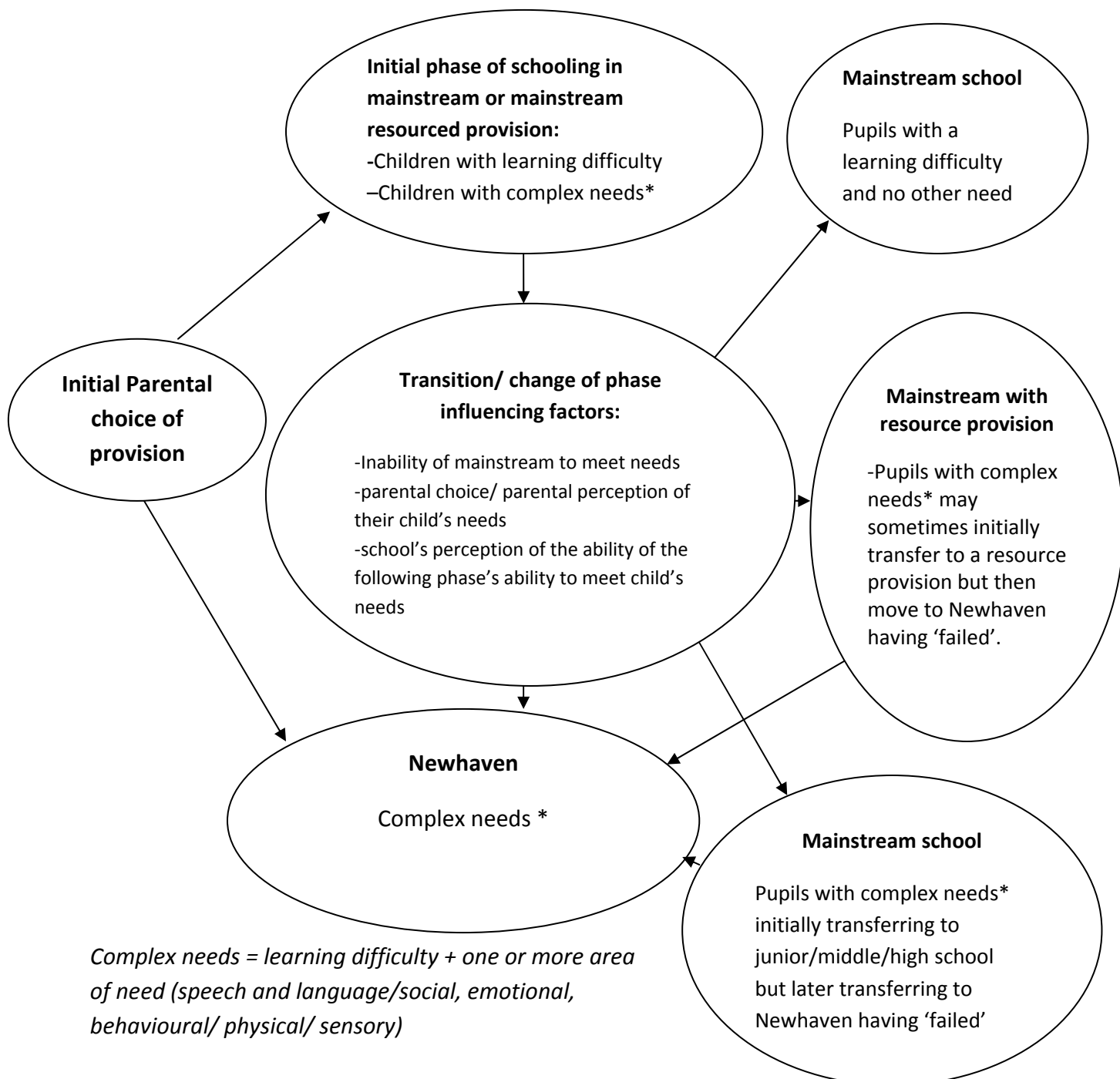
### *The Strengths of Special Schools*

This was a theme that emerged during a number of the interviews, particularly in response to the question about what resources and provision Newhaven School offered that other schools didn't. The dominant theme related to the small size of the school and the small size of the

class groups, both of which were seen as a particular strength of special school provision (see appendix 2, paragraph 8.1).

### *Summary of Results*

The diagram below attempts to summarise the process suggested by the themes emerging from the interviews:



In the following discussion I wish to pick up on four themes in particular from the results: parental preferences; the impact of inclusion; transition between phases and the strengths of special schools. These themes have been selected because of their apparent impact on the shaping of the pupil population of this and similar schools. In conclusion some future directions and areas of focus for future research are suggested.

## **Discussion**

It is important to emphasise the small-scale nature of this research in which it was not possible to represent a comprehensive range of perspectives in the sample selection; for example, it would have been interesting to have been able to interview parents of children with complex needs and children themselves who are attending different types of provision. Despite these acknowledged limitations, the aim of the study, to examine perceived tensions and differences of opinion, through the use of interviews, has highlight some of the current issues which are impacting on its focus, Newhaven School. These issues are therefore likely to be impacting on schools offering similar provision in other Local Authorities. It may not be possible to draw any firm conclusions from the study, but it does help to identify some of the parameters and sites of the debate as perceived within a specific context.

We have established that there is a lack of clarity in the use of the term ‘complex needs’ and I have suggested that its use represents a purposive shift away from categorisation towards the idea of a ‘framework of response’ proposed by Rankin and Regan (2004). An impact of inclusion appears to have been a changing pupil profile both in mainstream and special schools, with the latter catering for pupils with greater levels of need (Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Baker, 2007), rendering former descriptions increasingly obsolete and giving rise to the conceptions of ‘a menu of additional needs’ and ‘a global umbrella’ as surfaced in the interview discussions. It appears that this lack of clarity around terms is also symptomatic of a



lack of clarity in government direction on policy and strategy for special education more generally; leading to potential ambiguity experienced in this and other local authorities. Baker (2007, p.72) refers to the 2006 House of Commons Education and Skills Committee report on Special Educational Needs which 'expresses concern over the Government's policy on SEN, especially as it relates to inclusion and to the confusion this has created for special schools.' This theme is picked up by Male (2007): she identifies that on the one hand, in its 2004 vision for SEN *Removing Barriers to Achievement* DfES (2004) (cited in Male, 2007, p.145), the government is anticipating that the proportion of children in special schools should gradually fall, but on the other, in the 2006 report, the government was described as content with the current position.

It would appear that at the same time as the Government has taken a step back in terms of its lead on inclusion, previous policies have gradually picked up their own momentum. In many Local Authorities special schools remain, but the strengthening of parents' right to choose where their child is educated, through the 2001 SEN and Disability Act and the subsequent SEN Code of practice, DfES (2001), has led to an increasingly complex picture of educational provision. This is a theme which was referred to by all the interviewees and was seen by some to be contributing to the changing nature of the pupil population at Newhaven School: thus pupils who were considered to have a level of need that was greater than the school had previously provided for were coming to the school because that was what their parents had chosen. It was the view of two of the interviewees that parents had made this choice because of a perception that the needs of the pupils at the S/PML school were greater than those of their own child. This fits in with a local and national picture where the needs of pupils with less complex needs are increasingly attending a mainstream setting, while at the same time the needs of pupils in S/PMLD schools are changing in nature as more children with high

dependency medical needs are achieving a greater longevity (Male, 2007); both these factors are impacting on the population of schools that formally educated pupils with MLD, resulting in their re-designation as provision for pupils with complex needs, to reflect their changing profile.

In contrast, at the same time as many children with a moderate learning difficulty and no other additional needs are being increasingly included in mainstream (Norwich and Kelly, 2004), some parents are making choices which go against this trend; Baker (2007) discusses the phenomenon of some parents exercising their right to choose special schools through the SEN tribunal, while both Croll and Moses (2000) and Cook and Swain (2001) talk about parents choosing to resist the closure of special schools. Barton (2003, p.60) however, argues that this isn't in-fact a choice, but rather dissent because of the mainstream system's limitations in 'providing for the full range of abilities and disabilities amongst children'. Although this point may have a certain degree of credibility it would appear that the situation isn't quite so straightforward because in one of the interviews it was identified that children with very similar needs might be being educated in either mainstream or special school depending on parental preference (see appendix 2, paragraph 4.6). It seems that there is considerable variation with regard to mainstream schools limitations, where some are able to successfully meet the needs of quite complex children while others are not, and parent's perceptions about whether a special or mainstream school is best placed to meet their child's needs. Therefore two sets of parents, each with a child with similar needs, might select different provision, one set mainstream and one set special school dependent on their perception of which is going to best meet the child's need. The Local Authority's parent partnership service plays a crucial role in supporting parents in negotiating these decisions.

Although it may be that in some cases children with similar needs, in terms of learning, are accessing either mainstream school or special school, the study by Norwich and Kelly (2004) would suggest that the likelihood of them accessing one as opposed to the other is heavily dependent on whether they have an additional need as well as a learning difficulty. They identify that for their sample of 51 children with MLD being educated in mainstream schools and 50 who were educated in special schools; 75% of pupils with MLD only were in mainstream schools, while 25% were in special schools, whereas for pupils with MLD and two other areas of difficulty 52% were in special schools and 20% were in mainstream. However, they fail to account for the other 28% and the table in which they present the data is far from clear, Norwich and Kelly (2004, p.48). Despite the issues with clarity of data and its presentation, these findings do seem to accord with the views of the interviewees who all identified that pupils at Newhaven would have additional needs; for example 'often there will be another additional need, be that something to do with communication, or behaviour issues or social and emotional issues'. It would appear then that there are perceptions held by professionals, perhaps not clearly defined or articulated, that for those children whose needs may require more than simple adaptation and differentiation of the mainstream curriculum, perhaps pupils who need the input of other 'para medical' professionals or conversely those with greater needs in relation to their social and emotional difficulties, that a provision that is more intimate, with smaller classes and higher staff ratios, where there is a greater emphasis on care and relationship building, indeed the type of provision offered by Newhaven, is far more appropriate. Within the current configuration of SEN provision in the LA this may be a reasonable response; for many mainstream schools it may be that they would see this provision as necessary for only those children with the greatest level of need. For example, one interviewee in discussing children with 'cognitive issues' said: 'I would never expect a

child to go there [*Newhaven*] for that reason because we could cope'. However, for others the thresholds may be much lower and having a learning difficulty and merely looking different may be enough cause to make a recommendation: the same interviewee in recalling a conversation, about a child, with a SENCo from another school, who reported having 'managed' to get the child into a special school because they had a reading age of 6 years 6 months, had asked if that was the child's only difficulty and received the response 'well, she had a big head'. The view of the special school role typified here is perhaps an extreme one, however, it does surface the issue of differential attitudes between individual schools which may be resulting in a higher rate of pupil transfer into special schools for pupils from certain catchment areas as opposed to others; if that is, in fact, the case then this is a compelling reason for developing clearer admissions criteria for specialist provision in order to increase the likelihood of parity of access.

Another theme that emerged from the discussion with the interviewees was that of transition. In the SEN review, Cambridge Education (2008, p.9) Head teachers of both resourced provision and special schools reported that for pupils accessing mainstream resourced provision in the primary phase, that on transfer to secondary: 'the majority of children transfer from mainstream provision to a special school setting.' This theme was picked up and commented on by a number of the interviewees. One person mentioned that: 'the majority tend to go in [*to Newhaven*] at secondary age, in year 7', another in discussing a particular pupil who had transferred from a mainstream school to Newhaven at year 7 said: 'something else it offers as opposed to the average mainstream high school is that it's a smaller setting and that was the reason J went, because he couldn't have coped in a huge high school.' This theme about the pupils with SEN being able to cope with transfer to high school is discussed by Maras and Aveling (2006). The students in their study reported the stressors of moving to

high school as relating to organisational issues such as adjusting to a more complex timetable, making new friends and finding their way around a much larger site. They identified a number of factors that could support pupils with this transition, such as the availability of a special needs unit that they could access whenever they needed it. However, the six pupils in their sample tended to have only one area of need such as social, emotional and behaviour difficulties, whereas the majority of pupils transferring to Newhaven, as already identified, have additional needs. The issues related to the needs of those pupils transferring to Newhaven would indicate a greater level of support than that identified in this study. Another study by Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans and Soulsby (2007), although discussing KS2 pupils, reports positive results when looking at the social and affective outcomes of inclusion. They report that pupils transferring from special school into mainstream, where preparation and support for peers had been carried out by an inclusion team, experienced positive social acceptance. However of the 14 children in their study, 'for 12 of the pupils the designated primary special need was autistic spectrum disorder' (p.108); so again it may be difficult to draw conclusions from this study that can be applied to the issues being raised by the interviewees in the context of the current study. However, the factors identified in each of the above studies: having a special needs base and thorough preparation for mainstream peers, may be areas worthy of further research in the context of supporting pupils with complex needs in the mainstream setting.

This leads on to the final issue that I wish to discuss which relates to the perceived strengths of special school provision that the interviewees talked about: this was predominantly seen to be about the smaller size and higher staff ratios, facilitating smaller class groups and the establishment of stronger relationships between staff and pupils. Although there appeared to be a consensus about this strength amongst those interviewed, the literature on this subject is

much more mixed with some writers, for example Dyson, (2005) suggesting that there is little evidence of the benefit of special needs education, partly because ‘the concept of need is only loosely anchored to any notion of aims or purposes’ (p.123). Hornby (1999), in contrast, in a review of literature points to a lack of evidence for inclusion: ‘particularly notable is a lack of studies demonstrating that the outcomes of inclusive programmes significantly improve the lives of young people with SEN’ (p.156). However, what both these authors have in common are clear arguments against that which they question, while neither offers evidence to support that which they advocate. Dew-Hughes (2001) in her research cites HMI reports and Ofsted reports on the quality of provision and standards in special schools both of which point to weaknesses, the latter suggesting that ‘up to a third of special schools failed to meet official standards or had serious weaknesses’ (2001, p.65). However, the HMI reports date from 1991 and the Ofsted report is quoted from the Sunday Times newspaper (1996; cited in Dew-Hughes, 2001). Since these reports were published, there have been many changes in special education and education more generally (for example the introduction of the QCA documents ‘Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties’, 2001) and in addition these quotes do not distinguish between schools for MLD, S/PMLD or BESD; there may have been considerable differences in strengths and weaknesses between these different provisions when looked at individually. Norwich and Kelly (2004) come to mixed conclusions in their report on a study involving interviews with MLD pupils: they state that there were ‘no significant differences in the degree of help from TA’s and teachers between mainstream and special schools’ (p.25) (a point that was also touched on by one interviewee when discussing parental preferences: see appendix 2, paragraph 4.1), however there was a perceived tension for those attending special schools between ‘the positive aspects of

receiving individually appropriate help with learning, and the negative aspects of experiencing stigma and devaluation' Norwich and Kelly (2004, p.44).

The debate centered on the benefits and difficulties with a special school system has been, and will continue to be, a contested area within which the sites of the debate, the schools themselves, maintain, in the majority of cases, a high level of commitment to the needs of their pupils, Ofsted (2006); this is irrespective of the dissent evidenced by the academic discussion, and the uncoordinated nature of government policies and strategy, which leaves schools and Local Authorities in position sometimes characterised by confusion. A final consideration in respect of future directions, however, might take into account the views of parents highlighted in the SEN review, Cambridge Education (2008, p.17) in which it was reported that: 'Parents would like to see the development of Resourced Provision in every pyramid of schools across [ *the LA* ]. This would enable their children to transfer between educational phases alongside their community peer groups.'

## **Conclusion**

Overall, amongst the interviewees in this study, there appears to be a degree of consensus around the needs of pupils that Newhaven School is able to cater for; however, there is a definite perception amongst those working within the school that the proportion of children with very complex needs is increasing. This picture is overlaid by a further level of complexity because parents now have an increased right of choice over the provision that their child is educated in; this can result in pupils with very similar needs attending either mainstream or special school. It also appears that differing attitudes around the needs of children, and schools abilities to meet these, may be resulting in children in different school catchment areas being more or less likely to transfer to a special school at change of phase. A number of future areas of research seem to be suggested by the themes emerging in this study:

do the attitudes of different schools affect the access to special school provision in different catchment areas and is this resulting in children with similar needs accessing different provision? ; What support do pupils with complex needs require to be successful on transfer to mainstream high schools? ; How do the outcomes for children attending special schools compare to those of children attending a high school with resourced provision?

Finally, it is hoped that the results from this study will be of value to the school and Local Authority on which it focuses; but additionally it is hoped that it may have some pertinence for other contexts that may be experiencing similar challenges in trying to organise provision in an increasingly complex system which appears to be evolving at a local level rather than as a result of clear policy direction from central government.



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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Questions PPR1**

#### **Preamble:**

Thankyou for agreeing to take part in this interview; It will take no more than forty minutes to complete. I would like to record the interview so that I can transcribe it later but I need to ask for your permission to do that. The interview will be written up anonymously and all names will be changed to pseudonyms. I will make brief notes as we go along and will read these back to you at the end to clarify that I have understood what we have discussed and that you are happy with what has been said. The purpose of the research is to look at the ambiguity in many authorities about the pupil population that schools historically catering for children with moderate learning difficulties should now provide for by focusing on Newhaven School as a case study. Through this interview and interviews with four other people representing different voices within the debate, the aim is to surface some of the differences of opinion that are held around this issue. The research is to be used to meet a University requirement and to begin to describe the contemporary understanding of these issues with the possibility of informing future change. I will send you a copy of the research once completed.

**Question 1:** What sort of difficulties do you think are covered by the term complex needs?

**Question 2:** Tell me / what do you know about the current provision for children with complex needs in \*\*\*\*\*?

**Question 3:** What are the particular complex needs that you think Newhaven School provides for?

**Question 4:** What are the complex needs that resourced schools and other mainstream schools provide for?

**Question 4a:** Are these the same or different to those offered by Newhaven School?

**Question 5:** Are there any particular complex needs that you think Newhaven School does not provide for?

**Question 6:** Are there any particular skills and knowledge that you think staff at Newhaven School have that other schools couldn't offer?

**Question 7:** What resources and provision do you think Newhaven School offers that other schools don't?

**Question 8:** Do you think that the pupils provided for by Newhaven School should have the opportunity to be included in their local mainstream schools in the future?

**Question 9:** Is there anything else that I haven't asked that you would like to tell me about?

**Thankyou for your time and for taking part in my research**

## Appendix 2

### Example Quotations Illustrating the Themes in the Results

#### 1. *Definitions of Complex Needs*

1.1 'Be that something to do with communication, or behaviour issues or social and emotional issues.'

1.2 'Well I think it's a very global umbrella that incorporates a wide range, so under complex needs I think every kind of learning need would fit under it really to various degrees.'

#### 2. *Pupils Who's Needs Cannot Be Met at Newhaven*

2.1 'If you think, well, this child, you know, doesn't have speech and language difficulties, assessments have shown that, you know, and they're academically not in the bottom 2%, or whatever, and you think this really is, you know, an ADHD but extreme, you know you've got lots of children with ADHD, but if your thinking this child has got real mental health issues, no I don't think they should be at Newhaven.'

2.2 'If they are at the more extreme end [*of the Autistic Spectrum*] they are very difficult to accommodate within what is still a mainstream sort of curriculum and provision, you know we offer all the subjects that a mainstream high school would offer, we run on that sort of timetabling model where pupils move from room to room, and teacher to teacher, and that doesn't seem to accommodate the more extreme autistic young people.'

#### 3. *The Impact of Inclusion*

3.1 'Obviously because of the changing nature of the population now who are catered for in mainstream, if the pupil's just (in inverted commas) got a learning difficulty, you'd expect that they might be catered for in the mainstream, unless it's really severe, therefore you'd expect the children that go to Newhaven would have more than one need if you like.'

'[*Pupils with*] MLD, they are now successfully being maintained in mainstream, we don't see that type of pupil at all, they didn't tend to have a menu of additional needs they were just struggling readers, struggling learners in general, Down's Syndrome...'

3.2 'I would say that some of the children in mainstream would be similar to some of the children at Newhaven, but they're, not all of them obviously, but there will be certain children who mainstream wouldn't be appropriate for, you know quite a large

number will have struggled in mainstream...the majority tend to [*transfer here*] at secondary age, year 7 (interviewer: so they would be in a mainstream primary school) in a primary (interviewer: and then they move) yes’.

#### **4. Parental preferences and perceptions**

**4.1** ‘Many parents wanted them to go into mainstream because they would get 1:1 support, rather than going into a special school where they might be in a class of, I don’t know, six, ten with a teacher and a support assistant and they opted for the 1:1 support.’

**4.2** ‘It might be that there will be children at Newhaven who’s needs could be met in mainstream, but parents have expressed a preference for a special school, [*and*] we don’t have the grounds to say that that’s not appropriate.’

**4.3** ‘We have a small number of children where parents have stated a preference for a mainstream school, for whatever reason they don’t like the idea of special, but have found that the experience doesn’t meet the needs of the youngster, [*and then later*] they’ve transferred here.’

**4.4** ‘I think parents see youngsters who they perceive to be much more severely, medically in need and they think, my child is not that bad I’d rather send them to Newhaven.’

**4.5** ‘I think often because it’s the label and many parents want them to go to the local mainstream school because then they fit in with the neighbourhood, with the local environment and they want them to go to the local school.’

**4.6** ‘one parent might have a child that’s very similar to another, one set of parents might want a place at Newhaven and the other set might want them to remain in mainstream, but we have to go with both, whichever their preference, providing we can meet their needs.’

#### **5. Transition**

**5.1** ‘I know a girl that we sent to the junior school, they found that as soon as she went there she really needed to go to Newhaven, so they had this transition where so many times a week she was being bussed to Newhaven to spend time there... . I think their idea was that if they could get her to like it, parents might want her to go there as well.’

**5.2** ‘I think there are children who go to Newhaven who don’t need to, from talking to colleagues I think ‘why can you not meet that child’s needs’, I think that is disgraceful and it’s probably, I guess, lack of commitment from the Head teachers, who are not prepared to fund staff and resources.’

**5.3** ‘If our school was a through school I know that we could still accommodate, and I say accommodate because we are not specialist teachers, but we could certainly

accommodate them in our school for longer. Because I know our junior school doesn't have the provision, that's why we refer children and parents to go and have a look at Newhaven'

'We often get referrals from resourced schools at change of phase, so perhaps there needs can be met within the primary phase but at transition often they transfer into Newhaven'

'I'm thinking of a boy who managed for the four years he was with us but couldn't have transferred to the high school so he went to Newhaven.'

## **6. Challenging Behaviour**

**6.1**'we can accommodate a certain number of young people where behaviour is the prime special need but we get to a critical mass, and it is difficult to define that critical mass but perhaps it's something between 12 and 20 pupils out of the 160 odd, and if we tip over that number it starts to feel like a different sort of school'

## **7. Failure of Mainstream Schools to Meet Pupils Needs/ Standards Agenda/ Staff Skills in Mainstream**

**7.1**'They're results driven, that's the point, that's why they don't [*meet individual needs*]. They are too into league tables and pushing for results, for Ofsted, and you know individual children's needs just get overlooked in all that.'

**7.2**'They probably do a lot more work around the PSED and emotions and the ability to speak, rather than in mainstream which is very top down, raising standards to get the level threes at SATS.'

**7.3**'I think it's the behaviour that often mainstream teachers find difficult to cope with within a large group of children'

'Some children on the autistic spectrum are being diagnosed earlier on, I think possibly a lot of those children are going into mainstream and then finding it difficult, whether because of the larger classes or because teachers aren't experienced in children with that condition and coming up with different strategies to use.'

'Teachers themselves feel ill equipped to recognise difficulties,... they plough on but they don't, some teachers and NQT's, they don't know how to prioritise what a particular child's need is.'

**7.4**'[*The*] 1:1 support is working with the difficult children in the class and often you find that that person [*has*], very little training ,a temporary position and it is a very demanding job, so all these things could be taken into the equation [*as reasons*] why children have found it difficult to cope in a mainstream setting.'

'One of our support assistants, she comes to me and says 'they're wanting him to do this but he can't do that, he can't even do this', so I've said why don't you work in the classroom and support the red group (low achieving) and then some of your ideas and your resources would help the teacher; she then feels really uncomfortable about it,



because she feels like she's stepping on the teacher's toes by providing something a little bit different.'

## **8. *The Strength of Special Schools***

**8.1** 'I think what special schools do well is that they are small, you know, that they can accommodate, we can be much more personal with our youngsters.'

'Something else [*Newhaven*] offers, as opposed to the average mainstream high school, is that it's a smaller setting and that was the reason J went, because he couldn't have coped in a huge high school socially.'

'A child who we've got at the moment who has got cerebral palsy and he's not learning, he is physically unable to do some things, I think he would benefit from Newhaven - in smaller groups, smaller classes, much more focused attention.'

## **Professional Practice Report 2**

### **Working with Parents of Children with Special Educational Needs from Minority Ethnic Communities: Issues and Considerations for Educational Psychologists**

#### **Abstract**

This paper reports on involvement in an Early Years Statutory Assessment by the author with a child with profound and multiple learning difficulties from a Pakistani ethnic background. The child's mother spoke Punjabi and little English which required the use of an interpreter, in this case a Portage worker who was already involved with the family. This experience was used to undertake a search of the literature relating to the work of Educational Psychologists and other professionals when engaging with families from minority ethnic backgrounds. A discussion of this literature is followed by a critical evaluation of the authors own practice in the context of this casework is presented, with some considerations for future Educational Psychology practice.

## **Introduction**

This professional practice report resulted from an Early Years Statutory Assessment undertaken by the author with a child from a Pakistani minority ethnic background. The child's mother, a single parent, spoke Punjabi and little English. A Portage worker, who spoke Punjabi, was already working with the child and her mother therefore joint home visits by the Portage worker and the Educational Psychologist (EP) were set up. However, this experience raised some questions about possible limitations in the process which seemed worthy of further exploration through this report. In addition, a search through Educational Psychology in Practice, 1984 to 2009, returned only one article referring to work with parents from a minority ethnic background, Rehal (1989). Given that it is over twenty years since that paper was published it seems timely to look at this issue again in the context of the work of EP's, especially in light of changes that have occurred in society, schools and government policy since that date (for example: 1993 Education Act; Code of Practice 1994, DfE; 1995 Disability Discrimination Act; 1996 Education Act; 2001 SEN and Disability Act; Code of Practice 2001, DfES).

The fact that there is little literature discussing work with ethnic minority parents from the perspective of Educational Psychology, necessitated a search of literature from other disciplines such as social work and special education. Although the specific nature of the purpose, roles and models of service delivery for these professions is different, the issues of engaging successfully with minority ethnic groups are common to all. In addition, literature from the USA and literature relating to different minority ethnic communities was also searched because, again, although there are clearly differences between these communities and contexts, the experience that they have in common is the interface with professionals and

services that generally represent and reflect a majority culture: typically middle-class, white European or of European descent.

The aim of the report is to present a critical review of the literature and to subsequently use this to underpin the development and presentation of reflections with respect to my own professional practice discussed in the context of this particular case. Later I shall discuss my work with the family more fully and present a linked critical commentary.

### **Epistemological and Methodological Issues of Researching ‘Race’ and Ethnicity**

Before embarking on a discussion of the research previously carried out in this area it is important to consider some of the issues around research involving categorizations in terms of ‘race’, ethnicity or indeed any group categorization that, by definition, regards the members of that group as ‘other’. There is a danger in research of this nature of essentialising the membership of categories in such a way that they come to be seen only in terms of primary signifiers of difference associated with a particular ‘racial’ or ethnic group. Gunaratnam (2003) describes the necessity for researchers to work within racial categories, despite their potential for reification as a ‘treacherous bind’ (p.31).

‘...our very concern with naming and examining ‘race’ and ethnicity (often in order to uncover oppressive relations of power) always runs the risk of reproducing ‘race’ and ethnicity as essentialized and deterministic categories that can (re)constitute these very power relations.’ Gunaratnam, Y. (2003, p.32)

The researcher needs to take account of the fact that racial and ethnic categories are socially and historically produced and contain political meanings. They in turn are part of the social and historical relationships which constitute these meanings and as such they produce rather than reflect what is being researched. In order to resist the danger of producing and reproducing knowledge which further essentialises and stereotypes, the researcher needs to

‘break down binarism’ and ‘identify specific contextual meanings and emergent properties of race and ethnicity’ Gunaratnam (2003, p.22). Gunaratnam (2003) discusses the need for researchers to engage in a ‘doubled’ research practice whereby they seek to work both with and against racial and ethnic categories ‘at the levels of epistemology and methodology.’

‘This doubleness entails being able to address the historical particularity *and* the plurality of racialized and ethnicized difference, at the same time as interrupting binary systems of knowledge production’ (P.22).

These binary systems of knowledge production in relation to race have a history that originated in the seventeenth century when ‘the idea of race developed to account for the manifest physical and cultural differences between people’ Pilkington (2003, p.12). They later found their way into the developing fields of biology and psychology in the nineteenth century as Cole (1996) describes in discussing the contribution of cultural psychology to our understanding of the concept of race.

### **The Influence and Contribution of Cultural Psychology to Understanding Different Perspectives**

During the nineteenth century, influenced by Darwinian ideas and the colonisation and subjugation of other ‘primitive’ cultures, theories about cultural and ‘racial’ difference emerged in the minds of Europeans as a concept of primitive as child. Put simply, a view developed that the basic mental operations of people are universal but that they evolve ‘as a process of increasing differentiation and complexity of social life’ Cole (1996, p.18). In addition there was a belief that there was an intimate relationship between culture and mind which led to a conclusion that the thinking of adults in modern, industrial societies is superior to that of people in those less developed. Cole (1996) explains the evolution of this idea as follows:

‘...since it is assumed that the basic psychological processes are universal but their level of development depends upon the extent of one’s experiences, it is a natural step

to assume that there is a serious analogy to be drawn between the thinking of primitive adults and that of "modern" children, by virtue of their shared lack of complex experiences.' (p.15)

Cole (1996) goes on to suggest that this view was held by a great many Europeans in the nineteenth century and has remained part of popular culture. It is possible to see the reproduction of these ideas in the positivist paradigm of professionals in the west and further to this Kalyanpur (1998), suggests that:

'The epistemological assumption that professionals are the experts has allowed' *them* 'to determine what is appropriate or "right" practice and to label practices that do not conform as being "deficit."' Kalyanpur (1998, p.329)

This then tends to position those people that professionals provide for from ethnic minority groups as lacking in competence and unenlightened. In the following review of the literature a crucial measure of relevance relates to the extent to which research achieves a representation of its subjects as having the potential for other forms of personal and social identity as opposed to rigid categorizations which only emphasise certain differences and capacities.

### **Review of Literature**

There are a number of broad themes that emerge from an examination of the literature which are used to structure this review, these are: the impact of having a disabled child and differences for families from minority ethnic backgrounds; the impact of professionals holding stereotyping views and institutionalised racism; the impact of different attitudes to disability and expectations of services within minority communities; the impact of language barriers on parents' knowledge of the options and entitlements available to them; the existence of barriers to professionals working effectively with parents; and possible ways of overcoming barriers.

*The impact of having a disabled child and possible differences for families from minority ethnic backgrounds*

In a study looking at the experience of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents of disabled children, Fazil et al (2002) point to the resilience of the parents they interviewed in the face of many difficulties experienced in bringing up a child with a severe disability. However, they also acknowledge a high cost evidenced in high levels of psychological ill health. A later paper, by the same authors, Bywaters et al (2003) reporting on a study with the same group of interviewees, discusses attitudes towards disability. The authors identify the potential role that religious or spiritual beliefs may play for families as a coping strategy, suggesting that they may 'provide a psychological mechanism for a parent to manage their feelings about caring for their child' (p. 506). However, in the case of both these studies (Fazil et al , 2002; Bywaters et al, 2003) it is important to note that they involved a small number of interviewees, drawn from a particular inner city location therefore they may not reflect the attitudes of families in other areas. A further consideration is that the majority of interviewees were first-generation Pakistani or Bangladeshi, a review of research by Salend and Taylor (1993) discusses the impact of acculturation and suggest that cultural differences between first and third generation immigrant families may be greater than between those third generation families and counterpart families of the dominant culture.

*The impact of professionals holding stereotyping views and institutionalised racism*

Bywaters et al (2002), in reviewing the literature on the views of professionals about ethnic communities' attitudes to and care of disabled children, describe four key elements that they believe can be observed 'in the stereotypical view of 'Asian' parents' attitudes and behaviour' (p.503). Firstly that they have 'theologically based explanations of childhood impairments'(p.503); secondly that they experience 'a greater sense of shame than majority white families with a disabled child' (p.503); thirdly these feelings of shame 'contribute to the

low uptake of health and social care services by ethnic minority families' (p.503); and lastly that that these attitudes 'lead to low expectations of their children's future as adults and to a reduced willingness by parents to encourage their children to achieve maximum independence' (p.503). However, the authors found that although a minority of the parents in their study (3 out of 19) did refer to God, not all parents explained the child's disability in that way. A variety of reasons were put forward by other parents including consanguinity, being a consequence of illness and the side effect of medication. In relation to the sense of shame and its impact, the authors found that although a number of parents did express such feelings; however, in relation to uptake of services 'there was little evidence that parents had failed to seek help, let alone evidence linking low uptake of services to religious beliefs and practices' (p.507). Finally, the authors found that lack of information or experience of services tended to be the main reason for these parents having 'what might be described as low expectations' (p.508).

Nawaz (2006), reporting on research into access by black and ethnic minority families with a disabled child to services providing short breaks found that a commonly reported stereotyped view of Asian families held by professionals is that they 'look after their own' (Nawaz, 2006, p.53); however, Fazil et al (2002) found that this was not the case in their sample, 'only two mothers had help from a member of the extended family, the help mainly consisting of babysitting' (p.249). On the other hand, Rana and Ayub (2007) identified possible ignorance by some professionals that irrespective of whether parents are receiving support from extended family or not they may still make reference to them where decision making is involved. Their study into the needs and expectations of Asian families with SEN children in North Kirklees found that:



‘Some professionals or services were unaware of the extended family way of life amongst the Asian community. This meant that they were also unaware of the fact that grandparents, uncles, aunts and so on would have to be included in any decision-making about their child’s future.’ (p. 13).

However, it needs to be pointed out that this is not an academic, peer reviewed report, but rather locally commissioned, using semi-structured interviews with small groups and individuals. The report is in a suitable format for local dissemination but does not conform to the usual academic expectations such as reference to existing literature, justification of the choice of methods etc and providing a clear basis for any claims made.

Rehal (1989), in his study of the experiences of Asian parents in the statementing process, suggests that there is belief that Asian parents do not get involved with their children’s schools; he believes that this view is then generalised to the statementing process:

‘When the authority gets no reply to their initial ‘formal’ letter from the parents, the stereo-types of the Asian parents take over and it becomes a case of “oh well, that is the way they are – we shall just press on with the procedures” ’ Rehal (1989, p.194).

Rehal (1989) believes that this is a possible reason why, out of the 14 parents interviewed in his study, only one parent knew that their child had been through the statementing procedure. However, the author acknowledges that this is only his opinion ‘based on his extensive experience in the education system here and on his own Punjabi background’ (p.194); but it is therefore anecdotal evidence. In addition, the research used a structured interview schedule which may have limited the range and depth of information gathered. A further limiting factor of the study is that many of the parents interviewed had been through the statementing process four or more years previously (4 years previous: 6 parents; 5 years previous: 4 parents), therefore there may have been issues of recall for these parents.

*Impact of different parental attitudes to disability and expectations of services*

A study by Warner (1999) looking at the views of Bangladeshi parents on the special school attended by their children with severe learning difficulties, found that out of the seven parents interviewed, three of the parents did not initially understand the diagnosis their child had been given; two of the children had been diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and one with Down's syndrome. The author reports that the parents of the children with ASD remained unclear about their children's disabilities and as a result they did not feel that a special school was the right place for their child. In addition, one of the parents suggested that had the child been born in Bangladesh, she would not have known about Autism and he would have gone to a Mosque school. Warner (1999) suggests that:

‘The influence of parents’ Bangladeshi background was most noticeable in their feelings about their child’s disability. For example, two mothers indicated some sense of being blamed for having a disabled child, and another talked about seeking help from a religious person (*pir*) in Bangladesh’ (p.218).

However this assessment may run the risk, highlighted by Guneratnam (2003), of essentialising these parents; if two mothers indicated being blamed, then presumably the other five did not. In relation to parents seeking help from a religious person, this is a practice shared with some ‘white’ European parents of children with disabilities, for example those parents who take their disabled children on pilgrimages to Lourdes in France.

In their study into the experiences of Pakistani and Bangladeshi families with a child with a severe disability Fazil et al. (2002) report that three out of the twenty families in their study reported being afraid of going into their child’s school ‘as seeing the disabled children scared them’ (p.245). The authors also report that these families were reluctant to attend annual reviews because they found them distressing; this was additionally corroborated by the schools who were concerned that few of the families were attending. Rana and Ayub (2007) likewise found that some parents were reluctant to go into school and one parent reported

having only been once because ‘it was too distressing to see her child in a special school’ (p.14). They also found that many parents reported that ‘they often feel intimidated at meetings, particularly when there is a large presence of professionals’ and ‘written and oral reports contain jargon which confuses parents and leaves them without the information they need’ (p.14).

Dansec (1997) discusses a number of studies which describe different cultural attitudes to disability and concludes that parents’ beliefs about the nature and causes of their children’s disabilities ‘reflect both biomedical and sociocultural views and that parents’ beliefs on the nature and causes of disability provide the context for beliefs about treatment and intervention’ (p.48). She describes how the parents from the ethnic minority communities discussed in her research were engaging in the cultural practices found within the diverse communities where they live but also accessing professional services offered by the mainstream society, represented by government services and institutions. This, she perceives, ‘entails deploying the mainstream culture’s beliefs and practices and at the same time upholding their group’s cultural beliefs and practices’ (p.48). Dansoco (1997) suggests that professionals need to develop their knowledge of parents’ cultural backgrounds and their particular practices and beliefs to work effectively and to bridge the differences between these and their own values and practices. She expresses the need for research into these beliefs to inform effective interventions but warns that:

‘The dichotomy itself, between parents’ biomedical and sociocultural beliefs, may reflect investigators’ Western-based theoretical orientations and biases towards biomedical perspectives. Biomedical orientations are cultural tools, as are parents’ sociocultural beliefs, but scientifically-oriented beliefs are tacitly assumed to be valid’ (p. 49)

This clearly links back to the introductory discussion about the contribution of cultural psychology and the way that western professional positivism positions the knowledge of other

cultures as unenlightened (Cole,1996) and practices that do not conform as deficit (Kalyanpur, 1998).

*The impact of language barriers on parents' knowledge of the options and entitlements available to them*

This appears to be an issue of central importance identified in a number of studies which impacts on knowledge, engagement and uptake of services, resulting in greater levels of disadvantage. In their study of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents' experiences, Fazil et al. (2002) report that 8 out of the 39 parents that they interviewed said that the ethnicity of service providers was important to them; this was mainly because of language barriers. The authors also report that the parent who had most contact with service providers depended on which of the two spoke English and in most cases this was the father. They report that the majority of parents were first generation Pakistani or Bangladeshi and that one of the parents tended to speak English. The same authors in a later paper about the same research (Bywaters et al., 2003) report that it was clear that many parents did not really understand what had caused their child's impairment, they also found that there was 'clear evidence of the impact of language barriers to understanding, with the absence of interpreters in many medical consultations' (p.506). A study by Ryan and Smith (1989) picks up on the same issue in the context of Chinese parents in New York City, where a lack of awareness and understanding about their child's disability was also attributed to language difficulties; the parents spoke limited English and professionals had not been able to communicate in Chinese. However, even when interpreters are available this may not necessarily resolve all the issues. In a survey looking at the assessment of ethnic minority pupils by Educational Psychologists, Kumar (1988) found that although some EPs reported having the support of interpreters in interviews, they viewed this as creating possible problems because having a third person present 'changed

its nature and could influence the information obtained' (p.53). They also discussed their concerns about the interpreter's familiarity with psychological concepts. However, if the interpreter was unfamiliar with the concepts it seems likely that neither would the interviewee, rendering the issue highly problematic irrespective of the mediation of a third party.

Rehal (1989) describes a significant impact of language barriers on the understanding of the statementing process of the sample of 14 Asian parents in a study of an Outer London Borough, where only one of the parents in the sample spoke English (the author interviewed all the parents in Punjabi except for one interviewed in English). For example the term 'special educational provision' was not really understood, documentation sent out by the LEA such as the formal letter proposing an assessment was not understood, nor was their right to challenge the authority's draft statement and proposal of provision. The evidence from the interviews conducted by Rehal (1989) showed that communication between the authority and parents was not two way because of language barriers and as a result 'the letters sent home are simply not understood and the authority makes no effort to find out if everything that is being sent home is understood' (p.194).

The fact that only one of the participants was able to speak English in Rehal's (1989) study makes it is easy to see how this would be likely to impact on access to services for these families unless those services have strategies in place to support and facilitate communication. However, even in the case of families where one parent does speak English it may be problematic to assume that this ameliorates all of the issues. The reasons for this may be that the level of English spoken is not sufficient to cope with the sometimes complex language used by professionals and, in addition, if the parent that speaks English is the father and he is working, or is not the main carer (out of the 20 families in the study by Fazil et al. (2002) in

19 cases the mother was the main carer) then this may have implications for the levels of engagement that these families are able to have with those professionals. The issue of complex and specialist terminology is also discussed by Salend and Taylor (1993) who suggest that it is a compounding factor for parents from non-English language backgrounds in communicating with professionals. A further consideration is that, even with a good knowledge of spoken English, it is still possible that some families may be disadvantaged by a lack of knowledge of the British context. Fazil et al. (2002) summarise these points in relation to their study:

‘Undoubtedly, limited skills in the use of English by the families was a major barrier – though not the only barrier – here. Over the decades after the main contemporary period of immigration from the South Asian sub-continent, service providers still had not got effective means of offering services to non-English speakers or to those who are not familiar with the basic structures of the British welfare system’ (p.251).

Rana and Ayub (2007) also found that a lack of understanding was reported by those parents who were able to converse fluently in English. ‘When talking to professional contacts, they felt they understood some parts of what they were told, but the whole “message” is not comprehended’ (p.12).

In addition to barriers related to spoken English, it appears that there may be issues around accessing written information even where it has been translated because of a lack of literacy skills. Ellahi and Hatfield (1992) found that only six of the forty nine Pakistani parents that they interviewed would be able to read Urdu and 69% could not read or write in any language.

#### *Barriers to professionals working effectively with parents*

Fazil et al. (2002) found that the families in their study (15 Pakistani and 5 Bangladeshi) reported relatively little contact with service providers other than the child’s school and their

GP, for example only one parent reported having had contact with a social worker in the previous six months. However, there is no comparative data offered in this paper with which to identify differences from families with a disabled child in general. The authors go on to state that 'in general, families had difficulty in understanding the role of the service providers, identifying who they were and where they came from' (p.244). Fourteen of the parents interviewed said that they did want contact with service providers and the authors provide a breakdown into eleven different areas of need: respite care, practical help, housing, social worker, wheelchair access, help with child's behaviour, mobility allowance, physiotherapist, information about the child's 'illness', someone to sort out access and special furnishing; however, a number of the parents did not know which service they needed to contact.

Kalyanpur et al. (2000) suggest that one possible reason for poor parent-professional partnerships in the context of decision making around special educational placement in the USA, is that values contained within the legal mandate of 'equity, individual rights and freedom of choice' (p.127) may run contrary to the beliefs of some culturally diverse families of children with disabilities. The authors go on to argue that the expectations of equity and advocacy embedded in the legal mandate are in direct contradiction to the 'hierarchy of professional status and knowledge on which the positivist paradigm of professionalism is based' (p.119). Thus there is a dissonance between the ideal of the legal mandate which emphasises parent participation and the model of professional as expert. The authors go on to argue that this dissonance is more pronounced for culturally diverse families because: 'there is a subtle but significant distinction between parents who subscribe to an ideal and recognise its absence and parents who do not subscribe to it at all' (p.122).

Rehal (1989) found that the parents in his study tended to go along with the authority's proposal of a statement of special educational needs because of the inadequacy of

communication between the authority and the parents and because of ‘a fundamental assumption on their part that “the professionals know best” ’ (p.194). Kumar (1988) found that from most Educational Psychologists responding to their survey indicated having little information available to them which supported their knowledge and understanding of ‘the attitudes and beliefs of ethnic minority groups to issues such as special education, mental and physical disabilities, learning difficulties...’ (p.53). However, this type of information needs approaching with some reservation because, as discussed earlier, it can run the risk of essentialising and therefore ignoring the variance within particular groups.

#### *Possible Ways of Overcoming Barriers*

Kalyanpur and Harry (1997) discuss the need for professionals to develop a ‘posture of reciprocity’ when working with families of minority ethnic backgrounds which is built on a awareness of cultural difference: ‘professionals need to become aware of both the cultural basis of the services they offer and their own cultural assumptions’ (p.489). Rehal (1989) suggests a number of ways that Educational Psychology Services (EPS) and Local Authorities could improve their provision to Asian parents and families, some of which draw on cited examples of best practice. One example given is the translation of documentation explaining the statementing process into several ‘minority’ languages by Nottingham EPS which certainly seems a reasonable, basic level of provision; however, it does not address the potential issue of illiteracy amongst some families (Ellahi and Hatfield, 1992; Chamba and Ahmad, 2000). Other authors suggest possible ways of overcoming this such as Shah (1997) who suggests the use of interpreters or bilingual support workers and Ellahi and Hatfield (1992) who proposed putting information on audio tapes in Punjabi and producing a video in Punjabi of the same information contained in an information book. Warner (1999) also suggests producing a video in Punjabi to explain ASD for parents. Rehal (1989) suggests that



Local Authorities should maintain a list of Asian teachers that they employ stating the languages spoken; these people could then be used to interpret for EPs. Because of their knowledge of the education context he suggests that they would be well suited to fulfilling this role. However, this study was conducted shortly after the introduction of the local management of schools (UK Government, 1988) before this point there had been more flexibility within local education systems for this type of arrangement than exists currently. Kumar (1988) suggests that training in ‘cultural learning’ to raise awareness and sensitivity to diverse cultural norms should be made available to EP’s to avoid the use of inappropriate methods and practices which will continue to fail ‘because they do not fit into the expectations or reflect the values of ethnic minority groups’ (p.55).

### **Introduction to the Case**

The child in this case was three years old at the time of the psychological advice being provided and the pseudonym Zara will be used to refer to her in the following write up. Zara had a profound and multiple learning difficulty and epilepsy resulting from a severe episode of Herpes Simplex Type 1 Encephalitis, which caused serious long term neurological damage. She had been receiving input from the Portage service for over a year from a worker who spoke Punjabi. A decision had been made to request a statutory assessment because it was hoped that Zara would start attending a nursery provision in September of that year and it was felt she would need additional support to access this. Apart from her learning difficulty, Zara was totally dependent in all areas of daily living, she was fed by gastrostomy and her epilepsy was controlled by medication.

Zara lived at home with her mother and six older brothers and sisters; her parents were separated but her father lived close by and was involved in the children’s care and upbringing. Zara’s mother was the main care giver, she was first generation Pakistani and spoke Punjabi;

she spoke little English. There were no other family members involve in the care and support of the family which is consistent with the findings of Fazil et al. (2002). Other services that were involved, other than the Portage worker, included: Speech and Language Therapist; Physiotherapist; Occupational Therapist; Play Therapist, Paediatrician and Social Worker.

### **Critical Reflections on Practice**

The request for a statutory assessment was made by the Portage worker. In the Code of Practice (2001), under the chapter on identification, assessment and provision in early education settings it states that: ‘in a very few cases where there are severe and complex needs the extent of the child’s needs will be evident. In such cases requests for assessment might be made prior to any early education intervention...’ (4.36, p. 38). Through her weekly contact with Zara and discussions with other involved professionals, the Portage worker considered that additional support would be necessary for Zara to be able to successfully engage in a nursery setting. This case was then allocated as a pre-school referral to me; this involved initially deciding if there was a case for making a statutory assessment, informing the parents and referrer that I had been asked to give an opinion and providing written advice as part of a statutory assessment if appropriate. An initial meeting with the Portage worker was arranged to discuss the case and as a result of this it was agreed to carry out a joint home visit to meet Zara and her mother. Apart from being able to support me in gathering information on Zara’s needs, the Portage worker also acted as an interpreter as she was able to speak Punjabi. The support of the Portage worker was invaluable to me in this piece of casework, but the experience prompted me to reflect on the potential difficulties of carrying out the work had there not been a bilingual professional involved and the implications for my ability to ensure best practice even where this support is available. Many of the concerns that

arose out of this case are reflected in the literature reviewed above and my purpose is to highlight and illustrate these in the context of critical reflections on my own practice.

The first consideration, which relates to the administration arrangements of the LA rather than specifically to my own practice, is the fact that all correspondence to parents is in English (Rehal, 1988) and therefore requires access to translation by a third party which may or may not be available to parents; however, had the information been translated into Urdu it may still be inaccessible to many parents because they may lack the necessary literacy skills in any language (Ellahi and Hatfield, 1992). The Code of Practice, DfES (2001) in its guidance for statutory assessment of children under compulsory school age, emphasises the importance of gaining parental perspectives and suggests that 'LEAs should consider using explanatory leaflets or guidelines for parents to encourage their participation' (p.39). The findings from the research by Ellahi and Hatfield (1992) and Rana and Ayub (2007) suggest that translating materials alone is not going to be able to reach all members of the community and therefore to fully engage and empower parents other strategies would be required. In this particular instance the parent had been able to ask the Portage worker to read and explain the content of the letters to her. Warner (1999) similarly describes how parents found ways to overcome language barriers in the context of accessing the support of bilingual support staff in schools.

The experience of using a fellow professional as an interpreter to gather information from the parent raised considerations that I had not anticipated and which, on reflection, influenced the degree of detail I felt that I was able to capture, leaving me with a sense that I had not really succeeded in eliciting the complexity of the mother's thinking about her daughter. This issue is discussed in the literature by Kumar (1988) who felt that the need to use an interpreter could influence the information obtained. This resonates with my own observations, although because the interviews were carried out with another professional, rather than an independent

interpreter, the issues may differ in certain respects. Generally, there was a balance of enhancements and drawbacks to the interviews involving the Portage worker. The enhancements, as I perceive them, were that the Portage worker already had an established relationship with the mother and a good understanding of Zara's strengths and difficulties, which were of great value in identifying her needs. The drawbacks, as I perceived them, were that in interviewing a parent with a fellow professional interpreting for me, who was already involved with the child, it was difficult to approach the parent and child as a blank sheet, as it were, and therefore there are some lines of questioning that, in the company of this knowledgeable colleague, were rendered obsolete. For example, questions about the child's stage of development and difficulties as the parent perceived them. Had I been interviewing the parent independently, I would have been likely to follow these questions up because, despite their appearing obvious, they may have provided subtle and illuminating information about the parent's perspectives; especially if the parent holds quite disparate views from professionals which they may be unlikely to share in the professional's company. In addition, it can be difficult to resist viewing the child from the perspective of the fellow professional because of their good knowledge and experience of that child, but again this runs the risk of preventing the application of a fresh perspective. The result was that the information that I felt I was able to gather from Zara's mother was essentially superficial, most of the answers she gave to questions were unelaborated and it felt difficult to probe for more information in a natural synchronised tempo because interactions are delayed when using an interpreter as a result of their indirect nature.

Another important issue I was aware of was the extent to which Zara's mother understood the statutory assessment process or what my role was in that process. When I first visited her I did endeavour to explain my role and the process with the help of the Portage worker interpreting,

but if the SEN systems in this country are not well understood by Zara's mother it may still be unclear to her because she may not have background knowledge of what a statement of SEN provides for a child, her right to choose an educational provision for her child, and how the statement identifies the child's needs and the support they required. Rehal (1989) found that the parents he interviewed did not really understand the term special educational provision and Salend and Taylor (1993) also discuss the problem for parents of complex and specialist terminology, while Fazil et al. (2002) point to the fact that parents may not be familiar with the structures and systems in this country.

A further issue that I would like to consider was the decision about a suitable placement for Zara. The fact that there were a number of professionals already involved with Zara and her mother meant that there had been quite a lot of discussion about a suitable nursery provision for her prior to my involvement; the consensus was that the nursery in the school for profound and complex needs was most appropriate. While I would not disagree that this provision would be well placed to meet Zara's needs, I felt that the decision did not appear to have been actively made by her mother but rather by the professionals who then advised her that this was the right place for Zara. Parents have the right to express a preference for the maintained school they wish their child to attend (DfES, 2001), but when there is a high level of professional involvement which is reinforcing a system which could be argued to emphasise identification and conformity (even where this is benevolently implemented because of a perception that actions are in the child's best interests) it renders parents passive and disempowered.

Finally if the request for a statutory assessment is agreed there will be a requirement to produce a psychological advice to determine the nature of Zara's SEN and the implications of these for provision. Apart from the LA's SEN administration department, a copy will also go

to Zara's mother, which raises the issue of access identified by Rana and Ayub (2007). In this instance the best solution would seem to be to request that the Portage worker discuss the advice with the parent to check if it accurately represents her views and presents an accurate description of Zara's needs.

## **Discussion**

An understanding of the issues that face parents from minority ethnic backgrounds when accessing services is clearly important for all professionals including Educational Psychologists. However, in researching these issues with the intention of developing and improving practice it is also important to avoid the essentialising of the groups we are discussing and reproducing race (Gunaratnam, 2003). Important considerations therefore are the variation that exists within communities and in addition the existence of issues which may be held in common with other communities rather than being solely related to particular minority groups. There are, however, within the literature discussed in this paper, examples of how, in particular, language barriers and stereotyping views held by professionals can impact on the equal access and treatment of parents and children. The experience in practice reported here has drawn attention to the difficulty of fully engaging with parents even when working with an interpreter who is familiar with that parent and has good knowledge of them and their child. Where EPs are visiting with an interpreter who is less familiar these issues may be compounded.

In respect of the different cultural understandings around a child with a learning difficulty, it is difficult to fully understand these if you are not intimate with the culture and at best it may only be possible to have a knowledgeable awareness of their different perspectives. However, this is not a reason for EPs to fail to take account of the importance of these differences for the families they are working with or how these differences may impact on the way that they

view EP services. This is what is implied in Kalyanpur and Harry's (1997) recommendation of a 'posture of reciprocity' and the need for professionals to be aware of the cultural basis of their services and the cultural assumptions that they bring to their interactions with those they work with. The fact that there were a number of services already involved with Zara, comprising of predominantly health care professionals, and the fact that she had a profound and multiple learning difficulty with a known aetiology, meant that there was a strong discourse of deficit and pathology already constructed which focused on her medical needs and the barriers they present. At the same time, her capacity for social engagement and awareness of her siblings, and the clear motivation she experienced from the busy social environment of her own home were being relegated. This discourse is based on the kind of professional positivism identified by Kalyanpur et al (2000) and as they also highlight, this implies a hierarchy of professional status and knowledge which disempowers parents. The Code of Practice, DfES (2001) gives parents the right to choose the school that they feel would best suit their child with certain provisions (p.107) and parents may appeal if they are not happy with the placement, but for any parent with a child with the complexity of need that Zara presents, to opt for a mainstream school would require them to counter this powerful discourse which strongly suggests the need for specialist provision. However, for parents from a Pakistani minority ethnic background this may be an even greater challenge because this positivist discourse has the potential to emphasise a view of these parents that reflects the inherited nineteenth century view of other cultures as less evolved in their understanding which Cole (1996) describes. In addition, if parents hold the view that professionals know best, as Rehal (1989) suggests and 'parents do not challenge or ask questions because they think professionals are so much more knowledgeable' Rana and Ayub (2007), then in these

circumstances it may be highly unlikely that these parents would feel any sense of agency in the statementing process.

### **Possible Implications for Future Educational Psychology Practice**

Clearly the use of an interpreter when working with parents for whom English is not a first language is essential, but in order to ensure that our engagement with parents is meaningful and empowering it may require putting in place an extra step prior to contact, perhaps in the form of a prompt sheet. This might involve some simple questions to check out the parents understanding of the statementing process and SEN systems in England. It might also help to develop a better understanding of the parent's perspectives about their child with SEN by asking, for example, when they first became aware that there was a difficulty and what their aspirations for their child are in the future. Such questions might help to get an understanding of the attributions parents may be making for their child's difficulties and also the extent to which they perceive them as fixed or mutable.

Rana and Ayub (2007) raise the issue of parents lacking awareness of the importance of the extended family in the Asian culture and therefore there can be a tendency to overlook their influence in decision making for children. In addition to the questions suggested above it might help to start the information gathering process by producing a genogram (Gotler, 2001) which could be used as a focus of discussion about the different roles played by family members and their influence in the child's life.

Further, in relation to the use of interpreters, Shah (1997) raises potential issues of using lay interpreters who she suggests are:

‘... commonly family members, usually children, community leaders and anyone who says that they can interpret. It is in such cases that mistakes occur as there is no measurement from the professionals' point of view about the accuracy or quality of the interpretation made' (p.45).



The use of trained, professional interpreters is advised to try to overcome these potential issues and ensure that a good representation of parents' views is established.

One of the issues raised by parents in the literature was the feeling of intimidation when they attended annual reviews at the child's school because of the number of professionals attending (Fazil et al., 2002; Rana and Ayub, 2007). A potential way of redressing the balance here might be to encourage schools to develop person centred planning approaches such as the 'Planning alternative tomorrows with hope' (PATH) model described by Pearpoint et al. (1995). These approaches to meetings put the child at the centre and allow them to decide who should attend their review. This might support the involvement of other extended family members who may be involved in the child's life (Rana and Ayub, 2007) while at the same time providing additional support to parents.

In cases such as the one discussed here, where a child has a significant level of need and a number of professionals are involved, Educational Psychologists are the professionals who are arguably best placed to counter the potential positivist discourse and empower parents with a greater sense of agency. However, it needs to be acknowledged that this can be difficult to carry out in practice as it may involve questioning the assumptions of a number of other professionals. In addition, many parents may well value the clear guidance given by these professionals because choosing a provision for a child with complex needs can be bewildering. What is important is that we are confident that parents are comfortable with the decision and that it is consistent with their views and their aspirations for their child.

## **Conclusion**

The training of Educational Psychologists emphasises a social constructionist perspective of the problems that children with SEN experience which takes into account not only individual factors but factors related to the child's environment and context (Monsen et al., 1998;

Woolfson et al., 2003). To be able to gain a sufficiently rich picture of these interacting factors it is essential that they are able to communicate effectively with parents. Where parents are from a minority ethnic background that is different from the EPs there can be additional challenges to effective communication which need to be considered. These challenges may include language barriers but are likely to go beyond this because of the existence of different value systems and cultural norms. Only where EPs have an awareness of the existence of this 'cultural blindness' (Kalyanpur, 1998) do they place themselves in a position to question their own and others assumptions in order to promote a greater understanding of the child, their family and their cultural context in the interests of developing practice which is genuinely empowering and non-essentialising in its orientation.

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## **Professional Practice Report 3**

### **Report of a Group Work Intervention Using the 'Circle of Friends' Approach to Support a Pupil with Special Needs in A Mainstream High School**

#### **Abstract**

This case study report discusses the use of a circle of friends approach with a high school pupil who is identified as disruptive by school staff. The challenges of setting up, running and evaluating this type of intervention in a high school setting when working as an individual Educational Psychologist and the constraints of conducting research in the real world are discussed. In addition there is a discussion about attribution theory and how this might be used as a framework for conducting further research in this area and the value of qualitative methods in making sense of the complex interacting factors that contribute to difficulties experienced by pupils in schools and the most effective approaches to tackling these.

## **Introduction**

This case study reports on the use of a modified approach to the 'Circle of Friends' intervention implemented to support a year 8 pupil with a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) attending a mainstream high school. The decision to use the intervention resulted from a discussion at the boy's annual review, where concerns about his behaviour in class and the disruption it was causing were raised. The Circle of Friends approach was first developed in Canada to support the inclusion of people with learning difficulties in their local community (Pearpoint et al., 1992); later it was adapted for use with special educational needs pupils, including those with behavioural difficulties, who were being included in mainstream schools. Newton et al. (1996) suggest that:

'The circle of friends approach views pupil difficulties from a very different perspective. It is more concerned with what might be termed 'the social psychology of acceptance' and how this can be fostered in groups of children' (p.42).

The circle is initially led by a facilitator, preferably someone from outside the school. This person supports the circle 'to take control and responsibility for the task of keeping the focus child on track with their behaviour' Wilson and Newton (1996). Wilson and Newton (1996) believe that central to its effectiveness is the fact of the circle letting the focus child feel included and that they are cared about. In addition, Taylor (1997) points out that:

'This approach illustrates that many problem situations are a whole class problem and not one which rests solely with the child. It acknowledges that the "causes" of a problem situation are complex and interactive' (p.46).

It takes a systemic view: 'the context the child is in is viewed as maintaining and contributing to the problem' Taylor (1996). Frederickson et al. (2005) suggest that 'until recently, researchers and practitioners had seriously neglected other children's responses' (p.198). The

systemic aspect of the circle of friends approach suggested that it may be appropriate for use in this particular case; the behaviour and attitudes of the focus pupil's peers were felt to be actively reinforcing and maintaining his disruptive behaviour. One area of research that can help to make sense of peer perceptions and the complex dynamics of classrooms is attribution theory.

### **Attribution theory**

Attribution theory offers a way of understanding the reactions of peers and staff in school towards pupils presenting a problem: it suggests that people tend to attribute behaviour in a given situation to either mainly internal or mainly external causes. In addition Miller (2008) suggests that it is: 'concerned with how individuals invoke causes and explanations for various phenomena and the effects of these 'cognitions' on their subsequent behaviour' (p.160). Durkin (1995) discusses the attribution model described by Kelly (1972, cited in Durkin, 1995) which considers three factors involved in ascribing a behaviour to either an internal or external cause (e.g. disruptive behaviour): *consensus* of the behaviour (do most children behave in the same way in class?), *consistency* of the behaviour (does the person behave like this frequently?) and *distinctiveness* of the behaviour (does the person behave like this in one particular lesson or in all lessons). A pupil's behaviour is more likely to be attributed to internal factors if it has low consensus (other pupils do not behave like this), high consistency (the pupil behaves like this every day), and low distinctiveness (the pupil behaves like this in most lessons). Research by Miller et al. (2000) looking at pupils' attributions for difficult classroom behaviour found that they tend to focus on causes external to themselves such as teacher unfairness or other pupil's hostile intent. However, the effects of vulnerability to the influence of peers and schoolwork difficulties are also seen as significant by pupils. This perception of the perpetrator's vulnerability is an internal attribution, but one that is seen



to be beyond the control of the actor. In addition, pupil's attributions are significantly different from those of teachers, who tend to see parents and home circumstances as the causes of difficult behaviour (Croll and Moses, 1985; Miller 1995; Croll and Moses, 1999; and Miller and Black 2001) however; Miller et al. (2000) suggest that: 'while this study does not establish the 'truth' of any particular perspective, it does highlight the fact that causes of difficult behaviour may be perceived differently' (p.93). The role of attribution theory in the context of the current study is limited to a discussion of how it might explain the perceptions of other pupils and staff in school about the case study pupil, to examine qualitative data gathered through the use of a reflective diary and as a possible theoretical framework for guiding data gathering in future studies looking at the circle of friends approach.

### **Review of the Literature on the 'Circle of Friends Approach'**

The literature on the use of the circle of friends approach with children in school is limited. Earlier papers tend to be descriptive in nature, outlining and exemplifying the approach (Wilson et al. 1996; Taylor, 1997; Shotton, 1998) or using participant perspectives to provide illuminating qualitative evidence (Whitaker et al., 1998). Later papers have attempted a more empirical, evaluative approach focusing largely on outcome measures (Frederickson and Turner, 2003; Barrett and Randall, 2004; Frederickson et al. 2005; Kalyva and Avramidis, 2005). Wilson et al. (1996) use their own experience to give a thorough explanation of how to set up a circle of friends, providing considerations about the decisions that need to be taken at each stage. The authors acknowledge that 'we have not attempted any rigorous or systematic evaluation of outcomes' (p.46) but they suggest a number of benefits that they have observed through carrying out approximately 20 circles. In relation to outcomes for children they suggest that the approach supported developments in: empathy; problem solving skills; listening skills; the ability to identify and express feelings; understanding the links between

feelings and behaviour and increased awareness of an individual's power to change. Teachers were encouraged to keep notes about what was happening and the authors identify a number of themes from this data including: teachers felt more supported by the active involvement of an outsider; the approach encourages an emphasis on the positives for both teacher and pupils; teachers appear to experience an increase in self esteem and felt less isolated. However, although the paper provides a useful description of the use of the circle of friends approach in practice, it does not provide a sufficiently thorough evaluation on which to make firm judgments of its efficacy. The paper by Taylor (1997) similarly gives a thorough description of the setting up and running of a circle of friends but only provides the author's reflections of the process rather than any formal evaluation. She hypothesises a number of reasons why the circle of friends may be effective including the following: 'There is something very "human" about this process in that it touches upon concerns and needs that are universally shared.' 'The circles of friends provide a "full stop" and allow a new paragraph or chapter to begin.' 'The adults are honest and direct with the children about the problem and in looking for ways to help resolve things.' 'There is some degree of redistribution of power from adults to the children' (p.49).

A case study report by Shotton (1998) describes the use of an adapted model of the circle of friends with a year 8 pupil described as 'socially neglected' (p.22). Because of concerns that pupils who suffer from neglect as opposed to rejection by their peers 'may be young people who are extremely sensitive about their social isolation' (p.23) the model described by Shotton (1998) does not discuss the focus pupil in their absence 'rather the focus is on the needs of everyone in the class to establish and maintain friendships' (p.22). The paper goes on to describe how sociometry was used with the class to confirm the neglected status of the pupil and to identify other pupils she would like to get to know and other pupils who might

benefit from inclusion in the group. The author reports that a consequence of the intervention was that the target pupil became more talkative, gained in confidence and her attitude to school work improved. The evidence for this was observation by the author, the pupil's form teacher, her mother and anecdotal evidence provided by other teachers in the school. Had the author re-administered the sociometry at the end of the intervention it would have been interesting to see if there was any change in the way that the pupil was perceived by her peers. However, results from a study by Frederickson et al. (2005) (discussed in more detail later) suggest that the initial whole class session has the most impact in changing class mates perceptions of the focus pupil; therefore, given that the model described by Shotton (1998) does not identify the focus pupil, it may be that the main effect of the intervention are changed perceptions on the part of the focus pupil rather than for their peers, because there has not been a specific discussion about the focus pupil's difficulties.

Whitaker et al. (1998) set up seven separate circles of friends interventions for seven pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in years 3 to 10. The authors provide qualitative data in the form of interviews with the school staff leading the circles, the focus pupils, the pupils' parents and questionnaires with the rest of the circle members. Information was also collected from other members of staff in each school. Circle leaders reported improved quantity and quality of contacts between the focus child and their peers; reduced anxiety (4 out of 7) and improved behaviour were also reported in the focus child by leaders based on general observation. One reported drawback was that 2 target pupils had shown increased egocentricity which the authors speculate was as a result of the increased attention they were receiving and their lack of understanding of reciprocity. The circle members reported increased levels of empathy, understanding and self esteem. Parents were enthusiastic about the circle of friends but generally felt that it was unlikely to effect change in the child

themselves; rather, they felt that it might produce an environmental change by others around the child becoming more accommodating. In summary the authors acknowledge that ‘on the basis of this study it is impossible to know the extent and nature of any actual changes in behaviour which can be directly attributed to the work of the circles’ (p.64). In the context of this study it is understandable that questionnaires were used with the circle members because of the large number involved (52 pupils), however, it would have been interesting to have richer qualitative data, by targeting one circle to carry out a group interview for example. This would have the potential to illuminate the salient features of the process, what the pupil’s perceived to be important aspects of the way the group meetings work and how this has impacted on their perceptions of the focus child as opposed to self evident statements such as ‘it’s good to help’ (p.63).

In contrast to the previous papers Frederickson and Turner (2003) report on the setting up of an empirical study to evaluate the efficacy of the circle of friends approach when subjected to pre and post test measures of a number of aspects of social competence. The measures used included the Sociometric Rating Scale (Asher and Dodge, 1986, cited in Frederickson and Turner, 2003) which ascertained the other children’s perceptions and judgments of the target child; The Self –Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985, cited in Frederickson and Turner, 2003) which assesses the target pupils’ self perceptions in a number of different domains; The Teacher’s Rating Scale of Child’s Actual Behaviour (Harter, 1985, cited in Frederickson and Turner, 2003) which assess the pupil in the same domains as the child’s profile allowing a comparison to be made; and My Class Inventory (MCI) (Fraser, 1982, cited in Frederickson and Turner, 2003) which measures students’ and teachers’ perceptions of their classroom learning environment. The study involved 20 pupils aged between 6 and 12 with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The pupils were randomly assigned to either

group 1 or group 2 and baseline assessments were administered. The study took place in two phases. In phase 1, group 1 were the intervention group receiving the circle of friends and group 2 were a wait list comparison receiving thirty minutes a week small group work with a teacher, listening to stories on the theme of friendship. At the end of phase 1 the assessments were re-administered. In phase 2, group 2 received the intervention and were assessed again at the end. The assessment results were then compared with those administered to the group at the end of phase 1.

In phase 1, significant increases in post-treatment performance on sociometric ratings given by classmates were found for the intervention group compared with the wait list comparison group. For the group 2 pupils, significant increases in scores were observed in intervention phase 2 but not during the initial waiting list period in phase 1. There were no significant effects found between pre and post ratings by the focus students on their own perceptions of their social acceptance for either group. There were no significant effects on teacher's perception of pupil's behaviour for group 1 in phase 1, however in phase 2 there was a perception of improvement for the behaviour of pupils in group 2. However, the authors acknowledge that the results of this study need to be treated tentatively because the numbers involved are relatively small for the use of statistical data; additionally it would be helpful to have some follow up measures to ascertain the degree of maintenance for the increases reported. A further consideration is the difference in implementation between phases, in phase 1 the circles were led by psychologists while in phase 2 they were led by the pupil's class teachers which may account for the positive change in perceptions of teachers in phase 2; because they had personally invested in the intervention.

A study by Barrett and Randall (2004) presents data from two evaluation studies of circles of friends interventions, both of which involved adaptations to the original model. The authors

discuss the difference between rejected and neglected children suggesting that the former may have a high rate of peer interactions, the majority of which are unsuccessful, while the latter tend to have few interactions with peers. The authors suggest that this distinction is important when using observation schedules to gather evidence of frequency and rate of interaction compared with sociometric tests that look at the degree of peer acceptance.

‘There are clear differences between rejected and neglected children in terms of peer acceptance and interaction rate. Such differences can be identified through the use of sociometric tests. Rejected children will be more likely to receive few positive nominations and many negatives from peers doing the test, while a neglected child may receive few negatives or positives’ (p.354).

The authors then discuss the findings of a comparison study using two different models of the circle of friends approach. The first study involved only one child who the authors describe as ‘rejected’ by his peers. With this child they used the circle of friends model described by Shotton (1998). Sociometric questionnaires were administered with each child in the class before and after the intervention and then used to make comparisons. The results of the sociometrics from this study showed only a limited impact on the peer relationships for the focus child. In the second study an approach was used which involved the whole class, by setting up three circles to support three different pupils. The rationale for this approach is described by the authors as a response to a need, raised by Newton et al. (1996), to impact on a whole community:

‘This could address the issue of transferability of improved peer perceptions by allowing all the children to be exposed to the same “friendship” activities included in the circle sessions’ (p. 362).

The three focus children in the study are described as either neglected or rejected. This study was evaluated by asking each member of the class to complete My Class Inventory (MCI)

(Fraser, 1989, cited in Barrett and Randell) and a social skills questionnaire before and after the intervention. Interviews were also held with the children and teachers at the mid-point of the intervention and interviews with pairs of children were held at the end. A further evaluation was carried out four months after the intervention had formally ended. The results from this study showed that two of the children made gains in peer relationships which were maintained at the four month follow up, however the third child did not make gains. The authors hypothesise that for this third child, who they identify as the most isolated, there were a number of possible reasons why they remained unaffected including: the child not being targeted as in a model 1 circle of friends; the intervention was not long enough; the behaviours addressed in the circle meetings were not specific enough to address the problems; there were problems with the composition of the circle; and that circle of friends may not have been an appropriate intervention.

In this second study all three circles took place at the same time supported by 3 members of school staff, an Educational Psychologist and a trainee Psychologist. While the authors report gains for 2 of the 3 children, the level of input required seems likely to be prohibitive for the future uptake of this approach.

Frederikson et al. (2005) describe how they used a naturalistic sample of 14 primary aged pupils with a statement of SEN to evaluate the relative impact of different components of the Circle of Friends intervention by repeating a range of assessments: the LITOP questionnaire from the social inclusion survey (SIS) (Frederickson and Graham, 1999, cited in Frederickson et al., 2005) a sociometric measure of acceptance used to calculate an index of acceptance for each target child; and an adaption of the Guess Who peer assessment (Coie and Dodge, 1988, cited in Frederickson et al., 2005), which asks pupils to nominate classmates who fit particular behavioural descriptions, this was used to analyse the proportion of peers who

nominated the target child in each circle on each of the descriptions. These measures were taken at four different time points: the first one 2-3 weeks before the whole class meeting, the second 3-5 days after the meeting, the third a week after the last of the weekly meetings and the last one approximately one term (18 weeks) after the last circle meeting. They looked at the effects of the intervention on the class as a whole and the differences between those that had been members of the circle and those who were not in respect of increases in social acceptance and decreases in social rejection. The authors aimed to test out a number of hypotheses through their research: that the whole class meeting would result in the largest improvements in social inclusion; that further improvements would be seen during the small group component of the intervention but only for those in the circle; that improvements in social inclusion would be associated with subsequent improvements in behaviour. In addition, follow up evaluations were carried out up to four months after the intervention to see if the effects were maintained in the medium term. The results from the study show that overall there was a significant increase in peer acceptance and reduction in rejection for all the pupils as a result of the initial whole class session which supports hypothesis 1. However, there was no evidence that the weekly circle meetings resulted in further improvements in acceptance even amongst the circle members, therefore there was no evidence to support hypothesis 2. In relation to the third hypothesis the peer assessments of the pupils' behaviour showed no significant differences, there was therefore no evidence that positive changes in social acceptance were associated with improvements in behaviour. The results of the 18 week follow-up evaluation showed a return to baseline for those classmates not included in the circle on both measures of rejection and acceptance; the ratings of the pupils in the circle also appeared to be returning to baseline for acceptance however the rejecting ratings still remained lower. There are a number of limitations that the authors themselves discuss in



relation to this study, the first being that at phase 2 of the study, the follow up evaluation, for various reasons of attrition, only 7 focus pupils out of the original 14 were able to be rated; this is a very small sample size when using statistical data. In addition the circles were delivered by assistant psychologists rather than class teachers which the authors point out may have implications for a sense of ownership by those most directly involved with the pupils. While empirical studies such as this have an important part to play in establishing an evidence base for interventions like circle of friends, they are unable to capture the complexity of the real world situation. Levels of peer acceptance and rejection do give you a broad sense of how these pupils are perceived by their peers but they tell you little about that individual's lived experience, much in the same way that labels such as MLD and EBD offer a broad understanding of a pupil's needs but tell you little about their individual strengths and difficulties. Clearly there is a need for a broad research base that encompasses both quantitative and qualitative approaches that can complement each other by provide both a level of empirical rigour on the one hand and rich in-depth data on the other; case study methodology allows the incorporation of both in one study.

### **Introduction to this Case**

The focus pupil of this intervention is a year 8 boy attending a mainstream high school; he is from a Pakistani ethnic background and has a statement of SEN for language, learning, social and communication difficulties. For the purpose of this report I will use the pseudonym Raza when referring to him. In his annual review the school staff discussed their increasing concerns about Raza's disruptive behaviour in class which involved making repeated noises, singing and shouting out. The teaching assistants who were supporting him were finding it increasingly difficult to manage these behaviours; in addition, they felt that they were being reinforced and sometimes purposefully triggered by other pupils in the class. The discussion

suggested the likely-hood that there was a prevailing internal attribution for Raza's behaviour in school; he was considered to be very disruptive to the rest of the class (low consensus), it was occurring every day (high consistency) and in most lessons (low discrimination).

Shotton (1998) refers to earlier research, by a number of different authors (Coie et al., 1982; Asher and Coie, 1990; cited in Shotton, 1998), that describes the correlation between certain types of behaviours and sociometric status of socially isolated pupils: thus aggressive pupils are described as 'rejected' by their peers, while pupils who tend to withdraw into themselves and are generally overlooked by their peers are described as 'neglected'. A third group are the pupils who 'try to draw attention to themselves. They may become the class clown or else they may start to become disruptive' (p.22). The difficulties that the school were describing in relation to Raza would seem to suggest that he fits into this last group. In the literature there are examples of circles of friends being set up for pupils who are described as neglected (Barrett and Randall, 2004; Shotton, 1998) and rejected (Barrett and Randall, 2004) but not for those who 'act the clown'. Other studies do not identify their participants in terms of sociometric status but rather in relation to SEN classifications, e.g. EBD (Frederickson and Turner, 2003), ASD (Kalyva and Avramidis, 2005; Whitaker et al., 1998) and a range of different SEN (Frederickson et al., 2005). Some of the pupils in these studies may present similar behaviour to Raza in class but this cannot be discerned from these reports.

### **The Present Study**

The present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- Would the circle meetings have a positive impact on the circle members' level of acceptance of a pupil who is disruptive?
- Would the circle members find the process of taking part in the circle itself a positive and worthwhile experience?

- Would the circle of friends intervention have a positive impact on the classroom behaviour of a pupil who is disruptive and ‘plays the clown’?
- Would the circle of friends intervention impact on the sociometric status of a pupil who is disruptive and would it help them to develop positive interactions with their peers?

A questionnaire was given to the circle members at the end of the intervention to answer the first, second and third questions; a behaviour checklist was given to the pupil’s form teacher to provide additional information on the third question; and a sociometric questionnaire was given to the pupils form class before and after the intervention to answer the fourth question. In addition to these quantitative measures a reflective diary was used to add a deeper dimension to the data gathering. These tools and their limitations are discussed in more detail later.

## **Planning and Implementation of the Intervention**

### *Initial considerations*

Newton et al. (1996) discuss a number of prerequisites for setting up a circle of friends, one of which is the need for informed assent and support from the focus child’s parents; this was gained during Raza’s annual review when the approach was first put forward as a possible intervention to support his ongoing inclusion in school. The basic principles of the approach were explained to Raza’s mother and she gave her approval for it to take place. Newton et al. (1996) suggest that the school’s Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) should be asked to have a discussion with the focus pupil to explain the circle of friends to them and ensure ‘genuine *acceptance*’ (p.42) of what is about to happen. Taylor (1997) takes an opposing view on this, believing that it is important for an outsider to discuss the circle with

the child in order to avoid any coercion. In this instance I had confidence in the SENCo's judgment and the good relationship she already had with Raza, I therefore asked her to explain the circle intervention to him. I also requested the weekly, committed support of a teaching assistant at the circle meetings with the expectation that they would carry on running the group after the initial six weeks.

As a result of a discussion with the SENCo, a decision was made not to carry out the initial session with Raza's whole form, the standard approach to setting up a circle of friends, because there were few lessons where they were taught together as a group. Instead, it was decided to target a group of pupils who were in the same subject settings as Raza: this group contained the pupils who it was felt had the most potential to positively impact on his disruptive behaviour. The same issue and resulting adaptation is also identified and advocated for by Newton and Wilson (2003). In an earlier paper Newton et al. (1996) describe using several methods to arrive at the final group, one of which was to let the class teacher make the choice based on their knowledge of the pupils in the class; Taylor (1997) also discusses using this approach. This model was followed in the current study; the SENCo was asked to decide, in consultation with Raza's form tutor, who would be most suitable for inclusion in the circle. All the pupils who were invited to take part in the intervention freely consented to do so and permission letters were sent home to their parents (see appendix 6) (see appendix 7 for an outline of the implementation of the circle and the weekly sessions).

### **Case Study Methodology**

As described in the introduction, this report relates to research that arose out of a piece of case work being undertaken; as a result, the use of a case study methodology was largely dictated by the situation. Cohen and Manion (1994) define case study research as the observation of the characteristics of an individual unit; in this instance a circle of friends intervention with an

individual pupil. ‘The purpose of such observation is to probe deeply and to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomena that constitute the life cycle of the unit with a view to establishing generalizations about the wider population to which the unit belongs’ (p.106-7). However, Yin (2009) perceives that case studies are in fact like experiments and are therefore generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations and universes. He goes on to suggest that case study inquiry:

- ‘- Copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion, and as another result
- benefits from prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis’ (p.18).

The research described in this report fits the above description in that it uses multiple sources of evidence, discussed below, to look at the outcome of a single intervention and theoretical propositions are developed to guide this. In addition, Yin (2009) believes that case studies have a distinctive place in evaluation research, one of which is ‘to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for survey or experiment’ (p.19); which is the case for the current study. However, because of the constraints of conducting real world research in the context of the day to day casework of an Educational Psychologist, the ideal situation of being able to use a varied range of data gathering techniques (for example observation in different contexts, interviewing, follow-up measures etc) is limited by the time available and results in the selection of data gathering tools which offer the most pragmatic approach. Nevertheless, as the quote by Yin (2009) suggests, case studies can be seen as complementing other types of research, both qualitative and quantitative and they can also draw upon a mixture of both these types of evidence in their presentation of results, therefore it is still possible to collect evidence that is capable of further developing an understanding of the phenomena being investigated.

## **Evaluation Tools**

The Profile of Emotional, Behavioural and Learning Development (PEBLD), \*\*\*\*\* Educational Psychology Team (2001) (see appendix 2) was given to the pupil's form teacher to fill in before and after the intervention. The pupil's peers in his form class were given a sociometric questionnaire to fill in before the intervention began and again after the last of the six weekly sessions (appendix 3). The questionnaire was based on the one described by Shotton (1998) but with one adaptation; a conscious decision was made not to include a negative nomination option, but instead an option that identified others in the class that the pupils felt they were least involved with. After each of the circle meetings I completed a reflective diary (see appendix 4) which as well as recalling what had happened, also provided some qualitative data in the form of paraphrased notes of what had been said or recorded. This data adds a deeper dimension missing from the quantitative methods and also allows some tentative analysis using attribution theory as a framework. At the end of the last circle meeting a questionnaire was given to the circle members to gather their views about the intervention (appendix 5). This questionnaire was purpose created for the evaluation of the circle and asks specific questions about different aspects of its perceived impact on the target pupil and the circle members' own level of acceptance of the pupil as well as their perceptions of the efficacy of the intervention itself. The only other study to elicit the circle members opinions is that reported by Whitaker et al. (1998). In addition, the use of a mixture of quantitative and qualitative approaches, while acknowledging limitations in its range of sources, is a method of evaluating the circle of friends which, it is hoped, will be able to build on the findings from previous studies and offer suggestions for future research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In this report no reference is made to the real names of individual's or institutions. The data presented from the sociometric measures is entirely anonymous; the form teacher was given a script accompanying the questionnaires to read out to the class explaining the purpose of the questionnaires, who was doing the research, that all information would be presented anonymously and that they had the right not to participate or to withdraw their data. The circle members were asked if they would like to take part with the understanding that they could withdraw at any point, in addition, a letter was sent home to their parents seeking permission for their child to take part and indicating that the intervention was to be evaluated for the purpose of this report (see appendix 8). It was also explained that information would be reported anonymously therefore no individual would be identifiable from this report. A copy of this report will be given to the school to circulate as they feel appropriate.

### **Results**

Data from the PEBLD is only available from the post intervention measure (the first measure was not returned) therefore it is not possible to make any judgment about possible changes in behaviour over the time of the intervention from this. The results of the evaluation are presented in appendix 2. The areas of most difficulty post intervention are reported to be in the following areas: good learning organisation and works efficiently in a group (both of these are recorded as rarely happening). Areas of strength are: respects property and is physically peaceable (the first recorded as occurring constantly and the second as frequently).

The sociometric form asked peers in the focus pupil's class to answer four simple questions (see appendix 3) aimed to give a measure of how included he is. The results of the first measure are shown in table 1 (there are missing evaluations from 3 pupils in this measure). I have presented the results for the whole class so that it is possible to see how Raza's results

compare with those of his peers and to help illustrate a discussion about what they suggest about his inclusion within the class. It can be seen then from the results that Raza was not nominated as a person other pupils would choose to spend time with at break or lunch, nor was he nominated as a pupil that they spent least time with. He gained three nominations as someone the other pupils would choose to work with and six nominations for someone they would like to know better. Results for the second measure are shown in table 2 (there are missing evaluations from 6 pupils and in addition M13 is new to the class since the first evaluation). The only change from the first sociogram for the focus pupil is that this time he gained one nomination as someone chosen to spend time with at break and lunch.

The results from the questionnaire given to the circle members are shown in the table 3; all eight circle members completed the questionnaire. Because the numbers are small it would not be valid to use statistical methods, therefore the raw data is presented for visual inspection.



Name	A.Choose to spend time with	B.Choose to work with	C .Like to know better	D.Spend least time with
<b>Focus child</b>		<b>xxx</b>	<b>xxxxxx</b>	
M1	xxxxx	xxxxxx	x	xx
M2			x	xx
M3	xxxxx	xxxxx	xxx	xxxxxx
M4	xxxxx	xxxx	xxxxxxx	
M5	xxx	xx	xx	
M6	xxxx	xxxxxxx	xx	x
M7	xx	xx	xx	x
M8	x		xxx	xxxx
M9	x		xxx	xxxxxx
M10	xxx	xxxx	xxx	xxx
M11	xxxx	xxx	xxx	xxxxxxxx
M12				xxxxx
M13	xxxx	xxxx	x	x
F1	xxx	xxxx	xx	x
F2	xx	xx	xxx	xxxxx
F3	xxx	x	xxxxx	xxx
F4	xxx	x	xxxx	xxx
F5	xxx	x	x	xxxxx
F6	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
F7	xxx	xx	x	x
F8	Xxxx	Xxxx	xxxx	
F9	xxx	xxx	xxx	xx
F10	x	x	x	
F11	xxx	xxx	xxxx	x
F12	xxx	x	xx	xx
F13	xxx	xxxx	xxx	
F14	xx	xx	x	x
F15	xx	xx	x	

(M = Male , F = Female - Followed by a number)

**Table 1: Sociogram 1 showing the focus pupil's results and those of his peers prior to the circle of friends intervention.**

Name	A. Choose to spend time with	B. Choose to work with	C. Like to know better	D. Spend least time with
<b>Focus pupil</b>	<b>x</b>	<b>xxx</b>	<b>xxxxxx</b>	
M1	xxxxxx	xxxxxx	xx	xxx
M2	x	xx	xx	
M3	x	x	xxxx	xx
M4	xx	xxxxx	x	x
M5	xx	xx	x	xxx
M6	xxxx	xxxx	xxxxx	x
M7	x			xxx
M8	x		xx	xx
M9	xx	x	xxxx	xxxxxx
M10	xxxxxx	xxx	x	xx
M11	xx	xx	x	xxxxxx
M12				xxxx
M13	xx	xxxx	x	xxxx
M14	x	xxx	x	xxxx
F1	xxxx	xxxxx	xxx	xx
F2	xxxxx	xxxx	xx	x
F3	xxx	xxx	xxxxxx	xxxx
F4	xx	xx	xxxx	xx
F5	xx	x	x	xxxxxxx
F6	xxx	xxx	x	
F7	xx	xx	xx	xx
F8	xxxx	xxxx	xxxxxx	xxxx
F9	xx	xx	xx	
F10	xx	x		xx
F11	x	x	xxxxxx	x
F12	xx	xx	x	
F13	xxxx	xxxx	xx	xxxx
F14	xx	xx		x
F15	x	x		

**Table 2: Sociogram 2 showing the focus pupil's results and those of his peers after the circle of friends intervention**

Questions	Responses				
1.Do you think the pupil’s behaviour has improved in class since the circle of friends?	Yes 3			No 5	
1a.If yes, because of the circle of friends or for another reason?	Because of the circle 3			Because of another reason 0	
1b. If yes to question 1, how much do you think the pupil’s behaviour has improved?	Not muchBig improvement 1 2 3 4 5 1 1 1				
2. Would you be more or less likely to sit with the pupil in class since the circle of friends started?	More 1		Less		About the same 7
3. Would you be more or less likely to spend time with the pupil at break or lunch time since the circle of friends?	More 2		Less		About the same 6
4. How helpful do you think the circle of friends was?	Not helpfulVery helpful 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 4 1				
5. Would you take part in a circle of friends again?	Yes 4			No 4	

**Table 3: Showing results of questionnaire given to circle members.**

It can be seen that the circle members did not generally perceive that there was an improvement in Raza's behaviour; in addition two of the three pupils who did identify an improvement rank it modestly. The circle seems to have had little impact on Raza's acceptance with only one pupil responding that they would be more likely to sit with him in class and two would be more likely to spend time with him at break. Considering the impact of the circle of friends in relation to the group's perceptions and acceptance of Raza, their ratings of it in terms of its helpfulness are perhaps surprising; the majority of responses to this question identify the middle to upper half of the Likert scale. This seems to suggest that, as a whole, they perceive the circle as being modestly helpful, however, only half said they would take part in a one again.

The tables below present a selection of the qualitative data from the reflective diary; the data is analysed in relation to elements of attribution theory. The first table presents comments

made by the circle members in the introductory session when they were describing Raza; these comments tended to represent internal attributions for his behaviour.

<b>Element of attribution theory</b>	<b>Circle member's comments</b>
Low consensus	"he makes comments about people" "he sometimes makes noises in class even when no one is encouraging him" "he is easily influenced"
High consistency	"He doesn't listen to instructions" "he plays to the crowd" "he is scared to stand up to people"

**Table 4: Attributions ascribed to mainly internal factors during introductory session**

<b>Element of attribution theory</b>	<b>Circle member's comments</b>
Low consistency	<p>"Raza did really well in French, he started to make noises, I told him to stop and he did."</p> <p>Two pupils mentioned times when they had used the coloured cards and these had helped Raza to stop making noises</p> <p>One pupil mentioned that Raza had been ok in English, another pupil mentioned how he had used the cards in a Maths session to help Raza calm down when he had been given a consequence and this had worked well.</p> <p>A pupil who is in Art, drama and Music with Raza said that he had done really well in these sessions</p>
High distinctiveness	<p>"Raza worked really well during an off-timetable day last week. We just reminded him whenever he started to make any noise."</p> <p>"Sometimes Raza lets himself down by doing what other people tell him to do"</p> <p>One pupil discussed how he had been disruptive in an English lesson because other pupils had been encouraging him and another pupil described how at lunch he had been involved with pupils who were smoking and had been encouraged by them to be rude to the caretaker</p>

**Table 5: Attributions ascribed to mainly external factors during circle sessions**

The data in table 5 are comments made by pupils during the circle meetings; there is a noticeable move towards a view of Raza's behaviour which demonstrates an external attribution. The nature of the circle sessions can be seen to facilitate a dialogue which allows an opening up of the pupils' perceptions about the target pupil and promotes the identifying of exceptions thus promoting the possibility of this external attribution for the disruptive behaviour. However, this data and its analysis is offered only tentatively as it was not a thoroughly integrated part of the research design but rather developed as the study progressed. It is hoped that it may suggest possibilities for further studies.

### **Discussion**

The results from the questionnaire given to the circle members suggest only limited support in answer to the first question -would the circle increase their level of acceptance of the target pupil: only one pupil said they would be more likely to sit with the pupil in class and only two would spend time with him at break and lunch: the general view was that his behaviour had not improved. The question asking if the circle members would find the process of taking part in the circle a positive and worthwhile experience seems to have some support from the questionnaire results; the circle is perceived to be modestly helpful and half of the group said they would take part in a circle again. Taylor (1996) suggests that circles of friends is a lively and meaningful approach to personal and social development of *all* the children involved; it may be that at a personal level the pupils felt that they gained something from participation in the circle, even though they did not perceive it as impacting greatly on the target pupil or how they felt about him.

Because of the missing baseline data from the class teacher, the only information available to answer the third question – would the circle of friends have a positive impact on the focus pupil's classroom behaviour is that provided by the questionnaires given to the circle

members. The results from this offer limited support with only three out of eight pupils identifying an improvement; generally that improvement is perceived to be modest.

The fourth question -would a circle of friends intervention impact on the sociometric status of a disruptive pupil has limited support; the first measure identified no pupils who would choose to spend time with him at break or lunch, when the second measure was taken this had increased by one pupil. A problem with the implementation of the circle which may have had an impact on this is the fact that the initial meeting did not involve the pupil's entire form group, however the sociometric data *is* gathered from all the form group. In light of the findings from the study by Frederickson et al. (2005), which suggested that the initial whole class session had the most impact, this is a flaw in the design of this evaluation, however, as previously discussed, the implementation of the intervention was dictated by the real world context and the only viable way to gather the sociometric evidence was by targeting the form group despite their not taking part in an initial set up session or being taught together with the focus pupil in many lessons.

The results of the first sociogram (table 1) seem to fit with the problems that Raza was reported to be presenting in class: being disruptive by making repeated noises, singing and shouting out. Earlier, reference was made to Barrett and Randall (2004) who suggest that rejected children may have many interactions which are unsuccessful while neglected children have few interactions at all. In the present study, Raza's behaviour has been identified as disruptive; he does not appear to be either neglected or rejected in the way that Barrett and Randall (2004) describe. Raza's profile of nominations can be seen to be unique within his class; while no one nominated him as someone they would choose to spend time with, neither did they nominate him as someone who they spent least time with. Additionally, he received the second highest number of scores for someone that pupils would like to know better (see

table 1). This latter score could have been a Hawthorne effect (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939) as a result of the pupils knowing about the setting up of the circle of friends. He also received a number of nominations as someone that other pupils would choose to work with. This unique profile may reflect the fact that Raza's behaviour is related to his general learning difficulties, his low level of maturity and ability to understand social situations. He is a pupil who does not fit a classic pattern of either rejection or neglect. From discussions with staff in school it appears that his peers *do* respond to his interactions but they do not appear to be treating him in the way that they might if engaged in a mutual and respectful friendship, but rather as an amusing and distracting peer, thus reinforcing his negative behaviours rather than supporting him positively. A further consideration, which needs to be taken into account when interpreting the sociometry results, is that Raza is a pupil who receives full time teaching assistant support; this is likely to have an impact on his freedom to interact independently with his peers, a point raised by Lacey (2001). It is possible that part of the reason he did not receive any nominations as a person to spend time with at lunch and break is for this reason, conversely it could be *because* of the in class support that some peers would choose to work with him in lessons, particularly if they are struggling with the work themselves.

The second sociometric measure (table 2) showed only one change in Raza's profile, the nomination by one peer that they would choose to spend time with him at lunch or break. Although this may not appear to represent a significant impact of the circle, and of course it is not possible to say unequivocally that it is as a result of it, nevertheless this change may have had a powerful qualitative effect for Raza. He may be experiencing a level of friendship and support that he had not received previously. From the qualitative data in the reflective diary there is evidence that one of the pupils in the circle was beginning to develop a supportive

bond with Raza that appeared to be mutually reinforcing. A further consideration to be taken account of when considering the second sociometric measure is that there are six pupils from whom no data was received (a fifth of the class).

A final observation from the sociometric measures, which is worth discussion, is the evidence that they provide for the way in which school priorities work to identify some pupils as requiring interventions and not others, who may have equal, if not greater, needs but, because they do not present a management or control issue for the school, are not identified as in need of support. An inspection of both sociometric measures (table 1 and 2) reveals one or two pupils who appear to be being neglected or rejected by their peers, for example pupil M12 only has nominations as someone who pupils 'spend least time with' on both measures, however, he is not a pupil who is being offered any support in school. Interestingly, pupil M2 on the first measure (table 1) also appears to be rejected/ neglected however on the second measure (table 2) he appears to have made some gains in his level of acceptance; this pupil was one of the circle members and it would be interesting to know if these gains have been made, in part, as a result of his participation in the circle. It was noted before that the results of the questionnaire suggest that the circle members generally saw it as helpful, even though they did not see any great change in the target pupil's behaviour. Perhaps, therefore, its impact is much broader than on the focus pupil and their inclusion alone, a point raised by previous authors (Wilson et al., 1996; Whitaker et al., 1998).

In hindsight it may have been worthwhile using the initial circle meeting, when Raza was not present, to discuss the difficulties that he experiences with respect to his learning, language and social interactions and how these impact on his behaviour in the way that Frederickson et al. (2005) describe doing for a pupil with ASD in their study. The authors describe putting in this extra step 'in recognition of the difficulty that children with autistic spectrum disorders



have in modifying their behaviour in the absence of ASD-specific behavioural interventions' (p.212). They suggest that this then helps prepare the circle members to expect little change in the focus child's behaviour and helps them take a more directive rather than merely supportive role with the child. In the context of this study, however, I feel that an important part of this discussion could be around developing the pupil's thinking in terms of attributions. The cause of Raza's disruptive behaviour appears to be being attributed to his learning difficulties, but by identifying the exceptions where he is able to demonstrate appropriate behaviour it may be possible to engage in a conversation that could help the pupils to gain a deeper insight into the needs of not only Raza but other pupils who have difficulties. Such a conversation could foster an awareness of the important external causes that can impact on an individual even where it may appear that there are reasons to specifically attribute internal causes for their behaviour.

Although the data from the questionnaire completed by the circle members suggests that there has been little change in the groups' perception of Raza's behaviour, which supports the view put forward by Frederickson et al. (2005), the qualitative data from the reflective diary does give some support for a small shift away from an internal towards an external attribution. The pupils talked about his positive behaviour in certain lessons compared to others, for example art and music (a move towards higher distinctiveness) and the fact that on an off timetable day he had not been disruptive at all (a move towards lower consistency). However, although the pupil's clearly recognise that some of Raza's difficulties are the result of external factors beyond his control: "Sometimes Raza lets himself down by doing what other people tell him to do" findings from the study by Miller et al. (2000) suggest that they nevertheless attribute the behaviour internally, presumably because they perceive that the pupil lacks the ability to resist such external influences.

### **Constraints and limitations of the research and its design**

This study highlights the difficulties faced by the researcher when carrying out investigations in real world context. There were a number of factors that limited the systematic delivery of the intervention and its reliable evaluation. Working in the context of a high school determined the way the intervention was planned and delivered which as a result was pragmatic rather than ideal, for example the omission of the initial whole class session has previously been identified as a possible limitation. High schools present a number of challenges because of the greater complexity of timetabling and grouping structures when compared with primary schools. In setting up a circle in this context considerable preparation prior to commencement is likely to be needed in order to ensure that the most effective group to support the pupil is identified.

There were a number of issues related to the gathering of full data and the ability to carry out evaluations on time. Despite numerous requests, the baseline behaviour profile from the form teacher was not returned. There were missing evaluations from the sociogram on both occasions, especially the second. The questionnaire for the circle members was planned to be given to the pupils on the last of the six circle sessions, however because of the Christmas holiday, the school being closed due to snow and then confusion about meeting dates, there was a gap of eight weeks between the fourth and final two circle meetings which may have had an effect on the answers given.

### **Conclusions and focus for future research**

The case study reported here raises a number of issues with regard to the effectiveness of a circle of friends intervention in supporting pupils, particularly when measured using quantitative evaluations. The quantitative data from this study offers only limited support,

however qualitatively the degree of its impact seems less clear. The original purpose of setting up the circle for the pupil in this study was to support his continuing positive inclusion in school; the measure of its success is the degree to which it has been able to meet this aim, which, because of school priorities, is more likely to result from noticeable improvements in his behaviour than from his level of acceptance by peers. However, clearly these two are likely to be linked.

Sociometric measures convert complex social interactions into a number, which may be useful in identifying pupils who are potentially at risk of isolation; however, they tell you nothing about the processes leading to this. Clearly there is a need for rigorously evaluated research into the interventions that Education Psychologists employ, but, as the experience reported here shows, this can be difficult to achieve in the real world context of a school. Although the qualitative data presented here is limited, from an epistemological perspective, this type of data has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of how circle of friends may be supporting pupils in a way that is not captured by numbers - future research might usefully explore the pupil's perspectives using qualitative approaches such as group interviews with the circle members. Such interviews might give a greater understanding of the group processes involved in the success or otherwise of the intervention, how pupil's attributions determine their engagement with the focus pupil and importantly, the extent to which such attributions are fixed or fluid. Any further research needs to gain a greater understanding of 'what works best for whom under what circumstances' Robson (2000, p.55) when considering a circle of friends approach in EP practice. I believe that although the study reported here has been unable to achieve this, the processes of reporting the difficulties experienced in its set up and evaluation has highlighted the challenges that need to be considered in advance of such an undertaking and possible directions for future research.

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## **Appendix 1: Introductory circle of friends session plan**

### **Circle of Friends - Initial set up discussion**

#### **10 minutes: Set ground rules**

- Here to talk about X. It is unusual to talk about someone when they are not present but we need your help.
- Rules – talk one at a time and listen to each others ideas.
- Confidentiality – whatever is discussed in the session must not be talked about outside.
- Tell me some positive things about X (write up a list on large paper)
- Ask the group to describe difficulties with his behaviour (write up a list on large paper)

#### **10 minutes: Look at Circles Diagram**

- Draw the circle of friends diagram on a large sheet of paper.
- Label the different levels and discuss what they mean and who might fit in each circle – ask for suggestions.
- 1. Intimacy – people who love you the most (family)
- 2. Friendship – people who are not quite as close as circle 1.
- 3. Participation – acquaintances and groups of people in your life such as scouts, guides, football team.
- 4. Circle of exchange – people who are paid to work with you e.g. teachers, doctor etc.
- Write in names in each circle.

#### **10 minutes: Look at circle with few friends – how would you feel and act?**

- Look at circles diagram where none in middle circles.
- How would you feel if those two circles were missing?
- How would you act/ behave – write list.
- Compare this with the list for the focus child and discuss links.
- How can we help x – brainstorm ideas and write down.
- Discuss arrangements for next week – x to join the group and discuss with him/her what we have discussed this week.

Based on Newton and Wilson (2003) and Lown (2001).

## Appendix 2: PEBLD

<p style="text-align: center;">EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY TEAM</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PROFILE of EMOTIONAL, BEHAVIOURAL and LEARNING DEVELOPMENT</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>(‘PEBLD’)</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>--A Tool for Planning Change --</b></p>
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### INSTRUCTIONS:

- ❖ The PEBLD helps schools establish a profile and baseline of pupil behaviour.
- ❖ Compare baseline (1/PRE) and follow-up (2/POST) profiles to assess progress
- ❖ The PEBLD should be completed by a tutor or key worker who knows the pupil concerned
- ❖ The pupil’s behaviour over the last two months should be considered
- ❖ Tick ONE column ONLY (Never to Constantly) which best fits the pupil. Complete all items
- ❖ Please refer to the accompanying ‘Guidelines for PEBLD’ which describe each item

**PUPIL’S NAME:**

**Date of birth:**

**SCHOOL:**

**Date of baseline**

**COMPLETED BY:**

**Date of follow-up:**

CONDUCT BEHAVIOUR	1/pre 2/post	Never	rarely	sometimes	usually	frequently	constantly
<b>1. Behaves respectfully towards teachers</b> E.g. respects teachers and answers teachers politely, does not interrupt or deliberately annoy, does not show verbal aggression	<b>1</b>				<b>X</b>		
	<b>2</b>						
<b>2. Shows respect to other pupils</b> E.g. interacts with other pupils politely and thoughtfully, does not tease, call names, swear, use psychological intimidation.	<b>1</b>				<b>X</b>		
	<b>2</b>						
<b>3. Only interrupts and seeks attention appropriately</b> E.g. Pupils behaves in ways warranted by the classroom activity. Does not disrupt unnecessarily, or distract or interfere with others, does not pass notes, talk when others are talking. Does not seek unwarranted attention.	<b>1</b>			<b>X</b>			
	<b>2</b>						
<b>4. Is physically peaceable</b> E.g is not physically aggressive, avoids fights, is pleasant to other pupils, is not cruel or spiteful, does not strike out in temper	<b>1</b>					<b>X</b>	
	<b>2</b>						
<b>5. Respects property</b> E.g. Values and looks after property, does not damage or destroy property, doesn’t steal.	<b>1</b>						<b>X</b>
	<b>2</b>						



Emotional behaviour	1/pre 2/post	never	rarely	sometimes	usually	frequently	constantly
<b>6. Has empathy</b> E.g. is tolerant of others, shows understanding and sympathy, is considerate	<b>1</b>			<b>X</b>			
	<b>2</b>						
<b>7. Is socially aware</b> E.g. interacts appropriately with others, is not a loner or isolated	<b>1</b>			<b>X</b>			
	<b>2</b>						
<b>8. Is happy</b> E.g. has fun when appropriate, smiles, laughs, is cheerful, is not tearful or depressed	<b>1</b>				<b>X</b>		
	<b>2</b>						
<b>9. Is confident</b> E.g. is not anxious, high self esteem, relaxed, does not fear failure, is not shy, afraid of new things, is robust	<b>1</b>				<b>X</b>		
	<b>2</b>						
<b>10. Is emotionally stable and show self-control</b> E.g. moods remain relatively stable, does not have frequent mood swings. Patient, not easily flustered, not touchy	<b>1</b>				<b>X</b>		
	<b>2</b>						

Learning behaviour	1/pre 2/post	never	rarely	sometimes	usually	frequently	constantly
<b>11. Is attentive. Has an interest in schoolwork</b> E.g. Not easily distracted, completes work, keeps on task and concentrates. Good motivation, shows interest, enjoys school work	<b>1</b>			<b>X</b>			
	<b>2</b>						
<b>12. Good learning organisation</b> E.g. works systematically, at a reasonable pace, knows when to move onto next activity or stage, can make choices, is organised	<b>1</b>		<b>X</b>				
	<b>2</b>						
<b>13. Is an effective communicator</b> E.g. speech is coherent, thinks before answering	<b>1</b>			<b>X</b>			
	<b>2</b>						
<b>14. Works efficiently in a group</b> E.g. takes part in discussions, contributes readily to group tasks, listens well in groups, works collaboratively	<b>1</b>		<b>X</b>				
	<b>2</b>						
<b>15. Seeks help where necessary</b> E.g. Seeks teacher help when needed	<b>1</b>				<b>X</b>		
	<b>2</b>						

### Appendix 3: Sociometric survey given to the form class

Name \_\_\_\_\_

- A. Write the names of the three people in your form class who you would most choose to spend time with at break and lunch time.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

- B. Write the names of the three people in your form class who you would most choose to work with in lessons.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

- C. Write the names of the three people who you would like to know better in your form class.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

- D. Write the names of the three people you spend least time with in your form class.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 4: Weekly reflective diary**

### **PPR 3 Reflective Diary of Circle of Friends Intervention**

Circle of friends sessions were arranged to take place on Wednesday lunch times from 12.30 until 1.00. The initial venue that was arranged to hold the group meeting was the school's library.

#### **Week 1 : Introductory Session**

The initial session was late in starting because the original venue that had been arranged, the library, was not a quiet, private space and was therefore unsuitable for holding the circle of friends meeting. Another venue, an empty classroom was quickly sorted out, however by this time the first ten minutes were lost. As a result I decided that I would cover the first part of the initial session this week but would use the following week also to cover the material originally planned for this session. The session began with group introductions and setting out the purpose of the circle and what I hoped we would be able to achieve.

We discussed the positive qualities of the focus pupil and the following comments were offered:

“Funny”, “he’s good at drawing”, “he has a positive attitude”, “he is friendly”, “he works well with support”, “he is kind and considerate”. “he gets on well with others”.

We next moved on to discuss the things that were difficulties for the focus pupil or things that they found difficult about him:

“He doesn’t listen to instructions”, “he plays to the crowd”, “he makes comments about people”. “he is easily influenced”, “he is scared to stand up to people” “he sometimes makes noises in class even when no one is encouraging him”.

#### **Week 2 : Introductory Session**

Following on from last week we looked at the circles diagram onto which I had written the names of people contributed by the group for each of the four circles and I crossed out the names of all the people in circles 2 and 3 and asked the group to imagine how they would feel if all these people were missing from their lives and they were only left with the people in circles 1 and 4. We then went on to discuss how they might behave as a result of these people being absent from their lives.

The pupils suggested the following feelings:

“Sad”, “lonely”, “not good”, “depressed”, “miserable”, “left out”, “fine – because you have your family”.

They suggested that they might behave in the following ways:

“lose control – steal”, “I would be quiet”, “show off”, “get angry”, “get the latest gear”, “lash out”, “self harm”, “get in with cool people”, “be silly-make them laugh”.

We then looked at the list of difficulties that we had created the previous week and compared it with the list of behaviours that the pupils had come up with and we discussed how some of the problems Raza was having might be because he was having difficulties making close friends.

We finished by discussing the arrangements for the following week and I thanked the pupils for their positive engagement in the session.

### **Week 3: Circle session 1**

For this session Raza joined us. I began by welcoming everyone to the circle and then asked everyone to share with Raza why they wanted to be in his circle. I modelled this by first saying why I had wanted to set the circle up for Raza because I had been into school to see him work and knew that he could work really well in lessons but unfortunately I had heard that he might be finding it hard to keep up that standard at the moment and I wanted to help him with this. The pupils then contributed their reasons for joining the circle which were all positive and supportive.

One pupil suggested using a card with something written on it that they could show to Raza when he was having any difficulties in a session. Another pupil contributed the idea of having different coloured cards with different messages on them. We discussed what should go on the cards and came up with the following:

Red = be quiet

Orange = ok to whisper

Green = ok to talk quietly

I offered to make the cards and to bring them to the following session.

I thanked the group and we arranged to meet up at the same time the following week.

### **Week 4: Circle session 2**

We began the session by recapping on the ground rules for the group. We then discussed what had gone well for Raza during that week and different members of the group made the following contributions:

“Raza did really well in French, he started to make noises, I told him to stop and he did.”

“Raza worked really well during an off-timetable day last week. We just reminded him whenever he started to make any noise.”

We then went on to discuss things that Raza had found difficult during the week:

“In English Raza got a consequence for disrupting the lesson by making noises.”

“Sometimes Raza lets himself down by doing what other people tell him to do.”

We then discussed what the circle of friends group could do during the following week to support him with the difficulties he was having. At this point I showed the pupils the cards that I had agreed to make in the previous session and gave them out to the group. We discussed how we were going to use them to support Raza in lessons and the limits of how we could use them. I checked with Raza that he was ok with what we had decided and he was offered some cards of his own which he declined; I left a set with the TA with the understanding that he could request them if he wanted them.

I asked the group if there was anything else that they wanted to discuss and there were a couple of issues about supporting him in class and also one pupil discussed the issue of other pupils encouraging Raza to do things that he shouldn't be doing. We used this to then discuss the role of the circle of friends to act as a counterbalance to these other pupils in that they were going to encourage his positive behaviour and act as good role models for him.

I thanked the group again for their support and arranged that we would meet again at the same time next week.

### **Week 5: Circle session 3**

This week we were late in starting because the TA who usually supports the group was held up invigilating an exam; one of the school's SENCo's stepped in for this session but we were only able to spend 15 minutes on the session this week. After recapping the rules for the session we discussed what had gone well that week. Two pupils mentioned times when they had used the coloured cards and these had helped Raza to stop making noises – we were able to celebrate this success. We then discussed times when Raza had found things more difficult: one pupil discussed how he had been disruptive in an English lesson because other pupils had been encouraging him and another pupil described how at lunch he had been involved with pupils who were smoking and had been encouraged by them to be rude to the caretaker.

We then went on to discuss how we might support him to choose to do the right thing at these times.

One pupil suggested giving him a number out of ten in each lesson depending on how well he had done in it, another pupil suggested adding up the numbers and giving him a reward if he had done well. Another pupil felt that it would be difficult for them to focus on what Raza was doing and concentrate on the lesson themselves. I suggested that perhaps, rather than giving a number, we could work it in with using the coloured cards, so that if Raza got no red cards then we could reward him for his good behaviour. One of the pupils raised a concern

that that might lead to people using the red cards more than necessary. I discussed the fact that our purpose was to support Raza's good behaviour and not to focus on his negative behaviour.

One pupil raised the idea of using a sticker chart so that Raza could be rewarded at the end of each lesson and then in the Wednesday circle of friends meeting we could give him a reward for doing well. I suggested that it might be more straight forward if we voted on Raza's behaviour at the end of the week and perhaps as a result give him a reward.

I made sure that I valued all the pupils' contributions and acknowledged their positive ideas.

I frequently checked with Raza what he thought about what we were suggesting, but each time he said 'I don't understand.' I therefore repeated what had been said slowly, step by step.

At the end of this session I felt that the group had contributing lots of positive and constructive ideas, but that they needed some support with shaping them into a practical and realistic form. I also felt that Raza's level of understanding is a key issue for the success or failure of the circle and that anything we adopted would have to be meaningful and understandable for him. When I was asking him what he thought about all the suggestions he repeatedly stated 'I don't know, I don't understand.' The level of the discussion and the number of ideas being contributed appear to be too much for him to cope with.

In light of all the above I decided that whatever strategies are used need to have the following features:

- Visual and concrete;
- Low cognitive demand;
- Use simple language;
- Clear and unambiguous;

#### **Week 6: Circle session 4**

This week it took about 5 -10 minutes to gain access to the room again because it was locked. Raza was very excitable because he had been to R school in the morning and because it is very busy in the corridor at this time and he finds this difficult to ignore.

At the start of the session we went around the group and discussed things that had gone well this week. One pupil mentioned that Raza had been ok in English, another pupil mentioned how he had used the cards in a Maths session to help Raza calm down when he had been given a consequence and this had worked well. Another pupil who is in Art, drama and Music with Raza said that he had done really well in these sessions. We then discussed how we could continue to support Raza this week and we discussed dividing up responsibilities so that certain people took responsibility for Raza in particular lessons; this came out of a discussion about how he had found a particular lesson very difficult because there had been no TA support for him and the pupils felt they could help by sitting with him on these occasions. We also discussed what to do if there was a difficulty at lunch or break time and the limits of the

responsibility the pupils could take on so that if they were on their own and older pupils were encouraging Raza to do something he shouldn't, then it would probably be better for them not to try to intervene on their own because those pupils might turn on them. If there were two of them then they might support each other but again they should not put themselves at risk.

### **Week 7: Circle session 5**

This session took place on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2010, which was seven weeks after the last circle meeting on the 9<sup>th</sup> December. The gap was a result of disruption to timetable in school on the week preceding Christmas, the two week Christmas break and then disruption to school opening after Christmas because of severe winter weather.

### **Week 8: Circle Session 6**

This was the last of the circle meetings and was used as an opportunity to celebrate the successes of the circle and to thank the members for their support for Raza and their creative and positive ideas.

## Appendix 5: Evaluation questionnaire for circle members

### Circle of Friends Questionnaire

1. Do you think the pupil's behaviour has improved in class since the circle of friends started? (please tick a box)

Yes

No

(If **No** go to question 2)

- 1a. If you answered **yes**, do you think the pupil's behaviour improved because of the circle of friends or for another reason? (please tick a box)

Because of the circle of friends

Because of another reason

- 1b. How much do you think the pupil's behaviour has improved? (Circle a number)

Not much improvement

1

2

3

4

5

Big improvement

2. Would you be more or less likely to sit with the pupil in class since the circle of friends started? (please tick a box)

More

Less

About the same

3. Would you be more or less likely to spend time with the pupil at break or lunch time since the circle of friends started? (please tick a box)

More

Less

About the same

4. How helpful do you think the circle of friends was? (Circle a number)

Not helpful

1

2

3

4

5

Very helpful

5. Would you take part in a circle of friends again? (please tick a box)

Yes

Thankyou

No



## Appendix 6: Permission letter to parents

Parent/ Carer,

I am writing to you to ask your permission for your son/ daughter \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in a circle of friends group in school. Circle of friends is a strategy for supporting pupils who are struggling socially in school by seeking the help of their peers. We are setting up this circle to support a year 8 pupil who is having some difficulties and staff in school identified your son / daughter as positive role model for this young person. Your son/ daughter has been asked if they would like to take part and has agreed to do so but your permission is also required. The circle meetings will take place once a week at lunch time and will be lead by Andrew Byrne, a Trainee Educational Psychologist, supported by one of the school's teaching assistant. Mr Byrne will be evaluating the circle of friends for a University Report and will therefore be giving the pupils a questionnaire to fill in at the end. All information will be reported anonymously and you or your son/daughter have the right to withdraw from taking part at any time. If you are happy for your son/ daughter to take part could you please fill in and return the permission slip below.

Thankyou

XXXX

(Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator)

-----

I give permission for my son/daughter \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in the circle of friends group in school. I understand that the sessions will be lead by the School's Educational Psychologist supported by a teaching assistant and that information provided by my son/daughter will be used in a report at the end.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Parent/ guardian.

## **Appendix 7: Outline of the implementation of setting up the circle and the weekly sessions.**

### **The initial Session - setting up the circle and selecting the pupils to be involved**

In the initial session an adapted set up plan based on that described by Newton and Wilson (2003) and Lown (2001) was used (see appendix 1). All the pupils who had volunteered to be in the circle attended. The group comprised of five boys and three girls; I lead the sessions with the support of a teaching assistant from the school. Initially the ground rules for the group were set out, including the need for confidentiality. Next, Raza's positive qualities were discussed followed by the things that the group thought he found difficult, or that they found difficult about him. Lastly, the circles diagram was explained with the four levels of relationships: circle of intimacy; circle of friendship; circle of participation; circle of exchange. The diagram was filled in with the names of people and groups that the pupils belonged to. Because of a lack of time the session finished at this point with the intention of covering the rest of the initial session material the following week.

### *The weekly sessions*

The weekly sessions were delivered using the problem solving approach described by Newton and Wilson (2003). Each week began by reviewing the positives and negatives from the previous week and from there moved on to agree a problem area to work on. A specific target was selected and strategies were identified and discussed to help to achieve it. The pupils in the circle donated inventive and thoughtful ideas for supporting Raza and a point was made of valuing all contributions. The process of selecting useful and workable strategies was negotiated among the group with some supportive guidance. Raza's language and cognitive difficulties meant that he sometimes found it difficult to follow the group discussions; therefore agreed strategies had to be explained to him using simple language broken down

into small steps. One of the strategies we adopted was the use of three coloured cards; the circle members kept these in their pockets and could discreetly show them to Raza in lessons when they felt he was starting to find things difficult. These cards had simple messages on them that we rehearsed with him in the session: red = be quiet; orange = whisper only; green = ok to talk quietly. The embryo of this idea was suggested by one of the pupils who had noticed that Raza was good at remembering and following the rules of a teacher who used colour coded nail varnish to indicate the relative level of freedom she would tolerate in class on that particular day!

Once strategies had been decided upon, agreed responsibilities were divided between the group. Because the Circle was taking place in a high school, different members of the circle were in different lessons with Raza, so they each took on responsibility for supporting him in a lesson where they were present. At the end of the session there was a recap of the meeting to summarize what had been discussed and agreed. This was broken down, step by step, using simple language to ensure that Raza understood and that he accepted and agreed with the targets set. It was possible to be relatively confident that he was able to understand the basic ideas presented and that he was able to advocate for himself because on two occasions he firmly rejected suggestions: for example, when it was suggested that he have his own set of coloured cards as a reminder he was clear that he did not want or need them. These wishes were always respected.

## **Professional Practice Report 4**

### **Using a Self Organised Learning Approach to Reflection in Educational Psychology Practice**

#### **Abstract**

The value of reflection in the development and learning of trainee professionals has gained in recognition in the past couple of decades and there is a great deal of literature on this area, particularly in relation to the training of those involved in the human services for example teaching and nursing. There is, however, little research to date which discusses the use of reflection in the training of Educational Psychologists. This report discusses the use of an approach to reflection developed by Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991), Self-Organised Learning (S-OL) which offers a psychological framework for developing reflection on action that engages the learner in a learning conversation, initially with a coach but with the aim of increasing internalisation and personal control of the learning process by the learner themselves. There is to date little discussion of the use of S-OL in the research literature.

This report discusses the author's use of S-OL to reflect on the process of developing his own practice in relation to managing meetings involving parents, teachers and SENCos. Through the use of a cycle of planned and reviewed Personal Learning Contracts the aim was to deepen personal insight into the processes taking place in these meetings and as a result increase personal effectiveness.

It is hoped that reporting and discussing this process will illustrate the potential capacity of S-OL for supporting the learning of other Educational Psychologists, both those in training and in qualified professional practice.

## **Introduction**

The focus for this study emerged from my perception of a need for a coherent, psychologically formulated approach to structuring meetings with school staff and parents and a means of reflecting on this process in order to develop my practice. Having completed the second year of the initial training as an Educational Psychologist (EP) and gained a degree of experience in a Local Authority (LA) Educational Psychology Service (EPS) I had been involved in a number of such meetings that I perceive as being more or less successful; however, I had a sense that I was struggling to shift the discourse away from a paradigm of individual pathology and professional positivism towards a more social constructionist, ecosystemic view of the situations presented.

Self-Organised Learning (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991) is an approach to promoting change which puts the learner and their construing of events and the learning process at the centre; it is based on Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs which emphasises that it is the individual's personal meanings about situations and people which are important. It also makes reference to Maslow's (1962) ideas about the creative encounter, where 'something – an idea, an attitude change, an imaginative leap, a new skill – emerges out of the white heat of the encounter, or a completely new level of relationship between the participants is achieved' Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985, p.260). In addition, it draws on 'a Rogerian approach to facilitate personal reflection' Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995, p.3) which focuses on the conditions for personal growth. A decision was made to use Self-Organised Learning(S-OL) to both structure the meetings and as a tool for my own reflection on the process and it is this latter which forms the central focus of this report.

To establish a context for the discussion around S-OL and its use in EP practice, I begin with a general discussion about the nature of reflection, the influential thinkers who have attempted

to define it precisely in operational terms, and its impact on the development of theory for education, training and practice. This is followed by a brief outline of S-OL and the learning conversation and then three alternative approaches to reflection are considered: the highly influential theories of Schon (1987); an example of an approach to reflection from the EP literature by Mellor (1998); and an example of an approach to developing reflection in trainee teachers by Samuels and Betts (2007). The present study is then discussed and some limitations and potential areas for future development are discussed.

The areas of literature reviewed are predominantly theoretical because literature searches have produced very little in respect of the use of S-OL to facilitate reflection in professional practice or indeed in terms of its use more broadly.

### **What is Reflection?**

Moon (1999) provides a thorough review of the literature on reflection and reflective practice and attempts to draw some conclusions in order to guide future research and practice in this area. She suggests that ‘the way in which the word ‘reflection’ is commonly used suggests several understandings’ (p.4):

1. Reflection is the process of learning and the representation of that learning;
2. Reflection involves processing that leads to a useful outcome;
3. Reflection suggests more processing than would occur when simply recalling something.

However, when reflection needs to be defined in formal or academic terms, problems arise because there is in existence a number of different accounts of reflection; although the

common definition above is at the basis of all of them, they each emphasise or minimise particular aspects depending on their purpose. Moon (1999) makes particular reference to the ideas on reflection developed by Schon, Habermas, Dewey and Kolb, and suggests that most writers in this area have been influenced by the work of one of these authors. Jay and Johnson (2002) in looking at approaches to teaching reflection likewise find that 'even a brief review of the literature on teaching reflection reveals tremendous variation' (p.73); they go on to make reference to the work of Schon (1987) and Dewey (1933). In light of the influential nature of their thinking on reflection it seems appropriate briefly to discuss the work of Dewey, Habermas and Kolb; however, I do not intend to refer to the work of Schon here as it is discussed in greater detail in a later section which discusses other methods of developing reflective practice.

Dewey (1933) perceives reflection as a series of linked ideas with a purpose that aims to reach a conclusion; it is more than simply a stream of consciousness. The anticipated outcome of the reflection coincides with its purpose. Dewey identifies that a state of uncertainty or difficulty is crucial to the initiation of reflective thinking and the need to resolve this guides the process; testing through action is the conclusion of the reflective process.

Where Dewey (1933) considers the process of reflection, Habermas (1971) 'considers the place of the process in the acquisition, development and consideration of knowledge' (Moon, 1999, p.15). He sees reflection as a tool which is used in the development of knowledge; the nature of the knowledge selected for adoption depends on the knowledge constitutive interest: technical-instrumental, historic-hermeneutic or emancipatory. Habermas is interested in the different processes that underlie the generation of these forms of knowledge; reflection is one of these processes. He perceives that the historic-hermeneutic or interpretivist interest is the basic method of the social sciences but 'critical or evaluative processes of enquiry are

necessary to create a critique that can foster self-understanding and questioning of the process by which interpretive enquiry can be subject to distortion' Moon (1999, p. 14). 'Reflection used for emancipatory purposes can be viewed as the operation of the basic mental process acting within a framework that encourages critique and evaluation towards an outcome that is liberating in its effect' Moon (1999; p.15).

Kolb's (1984) contribution to an understanding of reflection is in his development of the concept of learning styles and the way in which individual difference and environmental demands interact to either emphasize or minimize a particular style. However, to be effective, Kolb suggests learners need all four abilities implied by the four different styles. Kolb (1984) defines these four abilities as; '*concrete experience* abilities (CE), *reflective observation* abilities (RO), *abstract conceptualization* abilities (AC), and *active experimentation* (AE) abilities' (p.30). However, Kolb recognises that to bring all these four abilities to bear on a particular learning situation is difficult to achieve because they are polar opposites, therefore the learner is continually in a position of having to choose which set to employ depending on the nature of the situation they find themselves in.

Jay and Johnson (2002) suggest that it is the complexity of reflection that makes it hard to teach and they conclude by pointing out that reflection rarely leads to a simple solution but instead 'ends with material for further reflection, new questions and improved understanding' (p.79).

### **Self Organised Learning**

'S-OL is defined as:

*the personal construction of **meaning** – a system of 'personal knowing'*

and

*Meaning is the basis for all our **actions**.'* Harri- Augstein and Webb (1995, p.2)



As previously outlined, S-OL has its basis in personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) which is a complete and formally laid out theory of personality. Cohen and Manion (1994) suggest that its focus is upon ‘the way individuals perceive their environment, the way they interpret what they perceive in terms of their existing mental structures, and the way in which, as a consequence, they behave towards it’ (1994, p.299) .

Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985) propose that there are three different learning paradigms: a ‘physical science’ paradigm reflected in the work of B.F. Skinner, where learning is directed by a trainer or exterior agent; a ‘personal science’ paradigm reflected in the work of Carl Rogers (1961), where learning is seen as a personal ‘flowering’ or ‘growth’ which is produced by a facilitator providing the necessary conditions; and a ‘conversational science’ paradigm reflected in the work and ideas of Kelly and S-OL, where learners are seen as full participants who are able to increase their capacity for learning through the sharing of experience in conversation, each participant remaining free to accept, reject and/or reconstruct shared meanings ‘using their unique position as observer of their own experience’ Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985, p. xxvi). S-OL explores the way in which our thoughts, feelings, perceptions and cognitions influence our actions: ‘the ways in which people interact with their environment – their *personal worlds*.’ Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995, p.3).

This notion of personal worlds is a central feature of Kelly’s personal construct psychology and it is through the elicitation of the individual’s personal construct system that S-OL is able to help the learner reflect on their own functioning.

‘A person’s construct system develops though the course of his or her particular life history and may change through the passage of time. *SOL makes a science of this change process*. It builds on Kelly’s metaphor of ‘the person as scientist’, i.e. making sense of the world by building a personal theory of it. Such personal theories form the

basis of subsequent anticipations and actions' (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995, p.3-4).

However, where good scientists will revise their theories in the light of fresh evidence that is contradictory, often people's scientific skills are not well developed and their theories are held implicitly at a subconscious level. As a result they are not open to revision and this can restrict personal growth. It is the aim of S-OL to help the learner bring these implicit theories into consciousness so that they can be considered and if necessary revised.

Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995) state that 'no one can cause learning in someone else' (p.2); however, organised education and training tends to work on this basis which results in people becoming dependent on being instructed (Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 1985) leading to 'robotic' performance whereby people carry out actions in an un-conscious, un-reflective manner (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995).

### **The Learning Conversation**

Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985) believe that 'Self-organised learners are purposive and can bring thoughts, feelings and actions into consciousness; creating an awareness in which learning is alive, relevant and viable' (p. xxii). The way that this is achieved is by means of the learning conversation in which the learner engages in identifying robotic behaviours, which may be unsatisfactory, and experiments by identifying and putting into action alternative behaviours. By reflecting on these experiments the learner is able to use the feedback to revise their meanings: the feelings and cognitions which produce behaviour. In this way individuals can 'converse with themselves in awareness and explore the possible relationships between experience and action' (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995, p.5). Central to the Learning Conversation is the role of the learning coach. Their role is to temporarily

externalise the Learning Conversation and make the nature of it explicit to the learner but with the aim of passing control 'back to the learner as awareness of the language and the skills of learning are developing' (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995, p.55). There are three stages of the learning conversation, a planning stage, an action stage and a review stage; each stage of the process can be supported by the use of a Personal Learning Contract.

The support function of the learning conversation uses a Rogerian approach to promote personal reflection: 'the 'personal science' unique to Rogers allows the individual to gain deep recognition that the whole self is more than just conscious awareness' (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995, p.3). By drawing on the principals developed by Rogers of *congruence*, *empathy* and *unconditional positive regard*, the learning coach is able to 'converse with the learners in ways that *mirror their processes*, heightening awareness and facilitating growth' (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995, p.3). Through the conversation the coach aims to support the learner bring into consciousness those routine 'robotic' responses that may be preventing personal growth.

### **The Personal Learning Contract**

The Personal learning Contract (PLC) (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995) provides a structure for carrying out the Learning Conversation. It comprises of linked purposes, strategies, outcomes and review, it is conceived of as an iterative process. The authors state that it is based on a deep psychological methodology: 'It is a major tool for Self-Organised Learning. As such it enables learners to converse with themselves about the process of learning and to review the quality of their learning competence' (p.73). During the planning stage of the learning conversation the learning coach elicits the tasks and topics that the learner wishes to

address and their underlying purposes; their motivations, in wanting to work on these is identified. The learning coach then helps the learner to identify strategies which need to be closely linked to their expectations about a desired learning outcome, the outcomes being how they will know when they have completed the task successfully.

During the action phase the learner puts the agreed strategies into place and is encouraged to record their actions, thoughts and feelings contemporaneously to help to develop awareness of what and how they learn, in contrast to 'robotic' learning. In the review phase, the learning coach helps the learner to reflect on their actions in relation to their PLC and differences between intended and actual purposes, strategies and outcomes are discussed.

'The *validity* of the learning relates to a review of how their strategies have worked to produce effective outcomes. The *personal significance* of the learning relates to how the topic and task of the PLC relates to the life level of the Learning Conversation, i.e. the overall needs and goals of the learners' Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995, p.90).

A reportedly common effect of the enhanced learning performance brought about through the learning conversation is a level of personal change. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) suggest that this is because it involves the disruption of established but poorly organised skills and the development of new attitudes which represent personally valid ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. In this way robotic performance and robotic learning, which are unconsciously executed and non adaptive behaviours and skills, are brought back into awareness thereby becoming available for revision and development.

### **Other Models of Developing Reflective Practice**

One of the criticisms that Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995) have of other approaches to training and self development, such as those based on the work of B.F. Skinner (1971), is that they perceive them to be highly prescriptive despite often claiming to be process-based;

because they do not ‘promote self-responsibility and continuous learning. [T]hey perpetuate what we would call *other-organised learning*’ (p.xxv). Schon (1987) similarly discusses an increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional approach to educating professionals that is rooted in ‘an underlying and largely unexamined epistemology of professional practice – a model of professional knowledge institutionally embedded in curriculum and arrangements for research and practice’ (p.8). He refers to an increasing awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of simply applying theory, learnt through professional training, to every problem faced by professionals because: ‘often a problematic situation presents as a unique case’ (p.5). Schon (1987) sees these unique cases as lying within what he describes as ‘indeterminate zones of practice’ (p.6) where learnt theories and techniques are insufficient; this leads him to consider the importance of what he describes as ‘professional artistry’ ... ‘the kinds of competence practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain and conflicting situations of practice’ (p.22).

There are a number of ideas put forward by Schon (1987) that have a resonance with S-OL; Kinsella (2006) argues that, as with S-OL, Schon was influenced by Kelly. An example of this resonance is demonstrated in the idea put forward by Schon that we bring spontaneous, routinized responses to our actions; this links in with the idea of robotic actions discussed in S-OL. These spontaneous responses are underpinned by what Schon (1987) describes as tacit knowledge that practitioners bring to their actions as ‘knowing-in-action’, this type of knowledge is difficult to verbalise and the act of putting it into language is a construction that is only able to capture a version of reality, it can only ever be partial: ‘for knowing-in-action is dynamic, and “facts,” “procedures,” “rules,” and “theories” are static’ (p.25). The spontaneous responses to problems encountered in practice are seen to be usually sufficient in most situations but sometimes problems are encountered which present a new dilemma.

Schon (1987) identifies that we may respond to such dilemmas by either ignoring their significance or reflecting on them in one of two ways. The first way is to 'reflect *on* action' (p.26), either after it has occurred or by stopping and thinking in its midst; the second way is to 'reflect-*in*-action' (p.26) without interrupting what we are doing (see Table 1 on p.12).

Schon (1987) describes how skilful professionals use reflection-in-action to experiment in action, and again, a parallel could be drawn with the strategies identified in S-OL which are also experimentations through action. However, although there are similarities and parallels between Schon's approach to reflective practice and S-OL there are also a number of ways in which they fundamentally differ. Where Schon (1987) focuses on the reflection-in-practice of the skilled professional, S-OL is more concerned with reflection-on-practice through the review phase of the personal learning contract. Both approaches make use of a coach; however the role of the coach in Schon's (1987) model of educating reflective practitioners is one of 'demonstrating, advising, questioning and criticising' (p.38). This is quite different from the learning coach in S-OL, where the role is to facilitate the exploration of theories, constructs, assumptions and governing values, and to donate alternative strategies where appropriate. Although Schon (1987) sees the reflecting-in-action of the student and coach as reciprocal and very much as a dialogue, which may appear to place it within the conversational learning paradigm, the emphasis on the role of the coach to demonstrate and guide the student still positions it as essentially other organised learning as opposed to self organised.

Mellor (1998) describes the use of a model of reflection in EP practice that he has adapted from a model developed for use by nurses by Palmer et al. (1994) (cited in Mellor, 1998).

**Table 1: Comparison of the different models of reflective practice discussed**

Model	Approach to Planning Phase	Approach to Activity Phase	Approach to Review phase	Psychological Underpinnings/ main differences from S-OL
Samuels and Betts (2007) Crossing the threshold from description to deconstruction and reconstruction: using self-assessment to deepen reflection	The self assessment schedule prompts the learner to question whether they are planning ways to try new ideas in practice.	The activity is only explicitly reflected upon after it has taken place. Learners make entries into a reflective journal of their practice and use the assessment schedule to support the deepening of their reflection on action.	Although the self assessment schedule is entirely focused on reviewing learners reflections the last questions are more specific in reviewing action: -Have I experimented with new ideas and ways of doing things -Am I consciously learning from my experiments? -What have I discovered by self-assessing my journal entry and what do I want to do about this?	Kolb learning cycle (1984) This is a psychological theory of learning styles developed by Kolb.
Schon (1987) Educating the Reflective Practitioner	There is no specific planning phase. Schon describes the model as an alternative epistemology of practice represented by reflection-in-action therefore reflection arises in response to problems as they occur they cannot be planned for in advance.	Activity is about developing the reflection-in-action that is seen in the performance of highly skilled professionals. It is seen as a kind of artistry that is 'tacit' knowledge, beyond words. Discusses the development of reflective practice usually taking place in a practicum under the guidance of a senior practitioner who acts as a coach.	Discusses the fact that reflection on past action may incidentally shape future action but there isn't a specific review phase within this model.	No explicit psychological theory underpinning but influenced by Kelly, Piaget and Goodman. Differs from S-OL in that it relates to the development of practice/performance that is <i>beyond words</i> . S-OL conversely is about <i>learning through conversation</i> . Like S-OL it models the process of reflection but does not provide the structure and framework of S-OL.
Mellor (1998) On Reflection: One Psychologist's explorations around an episode of reflection	Mellor discusses using reflection to analyse pre-planning, or what he terms prefection; however, the planning itself is not an actual incorporated element of the reflective model.	The activity phase in this model is only explicitly perceived to be reflected upon once it is completed. Unlike S-OL which identifies expected outcomes prior to action, in this model the question 'what was I trying to achieve'? is only asked once the activity is completed	In essence this model is focused specifically at the review phase. Mellor outlines the model as follows: Preflection; Celebration; Description; Reflections; Influencing factors; Could I have dealt differently with the situation? ; Learning; Are there any different forms of reflection I could carry out?	Like Schon the model is not explicitly psychological rather a way of structuring reflection around key themes and clearly broken down into different areas.

Mellor describes an initial process of reflection using a diary; this started out in an unstructured form but gradually recurring themes began to emerge leading the author to search for a model that could provide a greater depth of analysis. Having first looked in the EP literature, which offered few articles on reflection, he eventually adopted the model by Palmer et al. (1994). Mellor's adapted model can be seen to have clear parallels with S-OL, (see Table 1); however, it misses out the critical stage of reflection *before* action which is a central element in the S-OL model. Although Mellor has incorporated a section to consider pre-planning, what he terms Preflection, this nevertheless is a part of the process of reflection on action; the practitioner is being encouraged to reflect on the planning that they undertook prior to action. By contrast, in the S-OL model, the pre-planning, or intended purpose stage, is a fully incorporated phase of an iterative process whereby purposes, strategies and outcomes are fully elicited *prior* to action and then reflected on *following* action to identify differences. Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985) argue that these differences offer a deep level of insight into the true nature of our constructions of experience; our processes are 'psychologically channelized by the ways in which [we] anticipate events' Kelly (1955). In this way these purposes, strategies and outcomes offer a meta language to help us reflect on our learning in a way that is not offered by other approaches to reflection.

Samuels and Betts (2007) describe the use of a model of self-assessment that they introduced to support the reflective journal entries of student teachers. This model is based on Kolb's learning cycle (1984) of *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualization* and *active experimentation*; its purpose was to support the development of deeper reflection by learners when making entries into their journals. The schedule poses learners with a series of questions drawn from Kolb's explanations of the thinking processes entailed in the cycle: 'questions were intended to support students in recognizing the gaps,



strengths and weaknesses in their reflection and taking action to deepen their reflection’ (p.273) (see Appendix 1).

The authors evaluated the use of the assessment schedule, and their analysis of the data suggests four mechanisms that contribute to the increase in learners’ levels of reflection: ‘revisiting, structure, taking responsibility and metacognition’ (p.279). There are parallels to be drawn between the nature of the reflection that is stimulated through Samuels and Betts’ (2007) model and S-OL. Revisiting one’s reflections in order to obtain a deeper level is clearly an aspect of this model and it is also an aspect of S-OL as is the structure for reflection provided by both models (see Table 1). In addition, taking responsibility is seen by Samuels and Betts to be demonstrated through internalization of the assessment’s prompts: ‘the potential value of internalization is that students would not need to carry out self-assessment for every reflection but would be able to monitor their reflections at the time of writing’ (p.280). In other words, by using the assessment’s questions as a meta-cognitive framework, the students are potentially able to engage in a deeper level of reflection which helps to structure and formalise their thinking as it evolves. In the same way through the learning conversation in the S-OL model of reflection, the emphasis gradually shifts from the learning coach controlling the process towards internalization by the learner: ‘the ability to conduct most of a learning conversation with oneself is the essence of self-organization’ Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991, p.98).

The model described by Samuels and Betts (2007) is essentially metacognitive, it involves reflection on reflection: the learners’ reflecting on their practice through the use of reflective journals. Therefore, it is not intended to impact on action directly, but indirectly via the deepening of the learners’ reflections leading to a greater level of critical analysis of events. S-OL, on the other hand, aims to impact directly on action through the process of identifying purposes prior to action and specific strategies to achieve these in action. It is through the

direct dialogue between the learner's espoused purposes, as stated in the learning contract, and what they actually do in action, that the learner is led to achieve a greater degree of self revelation when examining the differences between those intended and actual purposes. These differences lay bare the dissonances between our personal constructions in action, the way that our core constructs lead us to act because of the meanings we ascribe to situations and the way we anticipate the replication of events, on the one hand and the purposes we identify through rational dialogue on the other. These purposes come about as the result of the learning conversation that has been engaged in, either with a leaning coach or with oneself, with the aim of making explicit what it is that we want to achieve. Through the examination of these dissonances and the iterative process of planning, action and review, S-OL aims to support new learning and personal growth at a deep psychological level (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991).

### **Developing a Model for Conducting Meetings Using Self Organised Learning**

I developed a consultation record to support school action plus meetings and piloted this using the PLC framework and the Learning Conversation as a model (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991); this was initially based on the record of consultation form developed by Clarke and Jenner (2006). These authors describe developing the record in order to introduce a Self-Organised Learning consultation framework to their service because the Educational Psychology Service had been based on 'paradigms reflecting within-child deficits, either in terms of behaviour or ability based on IQ scores' (p.193). They developed a 'record of consultation' form designed around the S-OL stages of purposes, strategies, outcomes and review; it was intended that the consultation should reflect the constructs of all those involved. In the same way I used the consultation record that I developed to identify and clarify the issues that were raised by school staff and/ or parents in the school action plus

paperwork and subsequent information gathered through my casework to identify the topics that were to become the focus of the Learning Conversation.

From this, the planning stage elicits the intentions of all those attending a school action plus meeting in the form of purposes (P) strategies (S) and outcomes (O). This consultation record was used to help structure these meetings and produce an agreed plan of action, with an agreed review date when the outcomes would be discussed. Through a sequence of reviews I hoped that each learner would relate his/her own assessment to a publicly agreed system of assessment. 'Managing the dialogue is concerned with helping the learner to run, or jump rather than stand still within her own passivity' Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991, p.135) (see Appendix 2, showing the first School Action Plus record form developed to elicit purposes, strategies and outcomes).

My purpose in focusing on school action plus review meetings was a desire to shift the discourse away from a paradigm of individual pathology and professional positivism towards a more social constructionist, ecosystemic view of the situations presented. These meetings were usually the first opportunity to get all those involved (parents/carers, school staff etc.) together to share the work that I had undertaken with a particular child. Often in this situation, I was aware of an expectation set up by myself, even if not intentionally, and located within me by others, either in response to my actions or through historicism, that I would 'present' my 'findings' and 'recommend' actions. I considered that as a result these meetings were falling short of what I aimed to achieve in terms of mobilising the inherent capacities of the people who had the most influence on the child's learning and progress.

As well as using the personal learning contract as a basis for the school action plus record form, I also used it at another, personal, professional level to reflect on my developing skills in using S-OL within these meetings. It is this use of the personal learning contract to support

personal, professional development that forms the basis of the following evaluation and discussion.

### **Evaluation / Methods**

Because of the process-driven nature of Self-Organised Learning, it is possible to use this model in any situation where a problem or task has been identified around which there is a desire for change to be brought about through reflective learning. Chng and Coombs (2004) describe using Self-Organised Learning to aid the reflection process in an action research project. The Personal Learning Contract (PLC) helped to structure the thought processes and reflections of the researchers in setting up and evaluating a project introducing critical thinking pedagogy to support primary school project work; they suggest that it is an effective means of making sense of experiential data.

‘With the experiential information organised, ‘meaning making’ takes place as new links are made and relationships formed between discrete ideas. From a critical evaluation of social situations, the action researcher is more discerning when making decisions. The knowledge constructed out of the reflective process therefore becomes meaningful to the action researcher and relevant to the problem at hand’ Chng and Coombs (2004, p.371).

I made a decision to use Personal Learning Contracts as a way of critically reflecting on my own learning in relation to the task of implementing S-OL in the context of school action plus meetings; then, in turn, reflecting on this process and how effective it was in the facilitation and promotion of my personal development.

Cohen and Manion (2000) describe action research as a ‘small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention’ (p.186). As a researcher of my own practice, my aims fall within the methodology of action research and the PLC provides an appropriate, congruent tool for making sense of the social constructions and reconstructions constituted in these meetings and my own and others’

impact on this. In addition, as a trainee EP, the opportunity to reflect on practice using the structure of the PLC is extremely valuable as Flornes (2007) identified in her use of S-OL with trainee teachers:

‘The theory has a focus on methodology which helps people explore ways in which they come to construct meaning for themselves, account for their actions and manage their personal and professional development’ (p.6).

By reflecting on my purposes, strategies and outcomes in relation to a number of meetings over time, the aim was incrementally to develop my skill in the use of S-OL to shift the emphasis towards the co-construction of meanings and solutions with colleagues and a social constructivist, ecosystemic understanding of the presenting problems. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) discuss the use of PLCs by managers as a private reflective tool for developing their personnel management skills; my own purpose in using the PLC was similar in that I wanted to develop skills in the effective management of meetings.

Although in receipt of regular supervision by both my placement tutor and University supervisor, neither was able to act formally as a learning coach because, the former did not have experience of the S-OL model, and distance prevented meeting with the latter flexibly enough to coincide with the time of meetings. However, I had been provided with a thorough introduction to the model during University based sessions, and had opportunities to both receive coaching and act as coach to my peers; I thus felt a level of confidence in my understanding and application of the process despite lacking the initial support of a coach. I therefore used the PLC for private reflecting; Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) suggest that ‘Learning Conversations may be conducted by individual learners with themselves or with their learning coach. It is the ultimate aim of every Learning Conversation that the skills in conducting it become internalised’ (p.32). The lack of a coach, therefore, while not ideal, had to be accepted; however, it needs to be stressed that any significant issues that arose were

always taken to supervision and discussed with my supervisor. However, in evaluating this use of S-OL the lack of a learning coach does need to be taken into account.

Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) suggest that before self-organised learners able to review the quality of their learning: ‘three to five cycles of PLCs covering at least three to five topics and tasks, with at least three sorties into the learning–to-learn level are essential for generating sufficient personal experiences for the learner to achieve effective, long-term change in learning skills’ (p.149). Over a period of ten months I periodically completed a Personal Learning Contract prior to a school action plus meeting that I was attending (n=4); these are presented in Appendices 4 – 7. Meetings were selected where there was need for a deeper level of reflection because either the case was complex or there were complex dynamics between the adults involved. Although I did not discuss the fact that I was using these meetings as the focus for personal reflection on my own skill development, I did endeavoured to share the purposes I had identified for the meeting at the outset. The ultimate aim of this process of reflection using the PLCs is that I, as the learner, would internalise these learning experiences and incorporate them into my future practice.

### **Reflections on Practice**

Over the period of time that I used the personal learning contract to support my reflection on meetings attended there was a development in my thinking in relation to both their content and dynamics. More specifically, there was a development in the format of the consultation record as a direct consequence of reflection on how it had supported the progress of the meeting and the construction of purposes, strategies and outcomes (please see notes on the management of the meeting and resulting completed Personal learning Contract in Appendix 4).

Initially the consultation record provided space to identify the key issues which had arisen from my involvement and those reported on the school action plus referral (see Appendix 2). However; after the first two or three meetings, as a result of reflection, using the personal learning contract, I became aware that this was resulting in the meeting being focused only on what the pupil found difficult; it did not allow for a discussion of their strengths: instead of leading to a balanced view of the pupil it was reinforcing a pathologising one (see Appendix 4: strategy/ differences). As a result of this reflection the consultation record was changed in order specifically to include pupil strengths (see Appendix 3). A second change to the consultation record, which also resulted from use of the PLC, was the addition of a section to identify previous strategies which had been tried; identifying which had been useful and which had not (see Appendix 3). In the meeting, the subject of this particular reflection, I had put forward a strategy that I believed would be appropriate in respect of the issues that had been raised. However, through discussion, it appeared that this had already been tried and the school staff considered that it had been unsuccessful. The change to the consultation record therefore provided a way to avoid this pitfall in future (see Appendix 5: purpose/ in action).

The PLCs included in Appendices 4-7 show a progression in the depth of reflection over time. The first PLC (Appendix 4) demonstrates little reflection in relation to my purposes although the strategy is identified to need further development because it was not entirely successful; the need to identify the pupil's strengths as well as their difficulties was highlighted. By contrast the second PLC (Appendix 5) demonstrates a greater depth of reflection. I had incorporated the sharing of the pupil's strengths as well as their barriers as a purpose, but went further in recognising a need to increase the understanding of the barriers and why they were having the reported impact on the pupil's progress.

I wish to continue by considering the development of my reflection in more detail by using the second personal learning contract (Appendix 5) as a specific example to discuss the process.

### **Example of Reflection – The Second Personal Learning Contract**

This PLC relates to a meeting about a reception-aged pupil about whom the school had concerns because of aggressive behaviour in class. In addition to myself, the meeting was attended by the boy's mother, the class teacher and the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo). The dynamics of this meeting were complicated, reflecting the conflicting views and concerns held by school staff and the parent: the boy's mother had concerns about the way the school had dealt with her son; the behaviour difficulties were reported only to occur in school; and it appeared school staff believed the boy's behaviour was a result of his being over indulged at home.

These views had been expressed to me during individual discussions prior to the meeting, although they had not been openly discussed between parent and teachers; however, their existence influenced the situation because they were impacting on the day to day interactions between the school and parent and on the way that school staff viewed the pupil. Miller (2008) suggests that this is representative of a widespread dilemma: 'it seems that at the very outset, there can be a fundamental disagreement between some teachers and parents as to who is responsible for this challenging behaviour' (p.158).

#### *The Purposes*

The purposes that I had identified prior to this meeting were:

- to share the pupil's strengths and barriers with school staff and the pupil's parent;



- to communicate what I had learnt effectively;
- to facilitate the selection of appropriate strategies.

On reviewing the PLC, I was able to reflect on what my purposes actually were in action. I had been aware in the meeting that simply sharing the pupil's barriers with those present was not sufficient; there was a need to increase their understanding of these barriers and also the potential reasons why his behaviour might not be problematic in the context of his home while at the same time causing difficulties for the school. I also found in the meeting that although I felt I had been able to develop a coherent and integrated framework of the problem's dimensions through the information gathered, via observation and discussion using the problem analysis framework developed by Monsen et al. (1998), this nevertheless represented *my* construing of the situation; it was therefore essential that this construing was checked out and revised through discussion with the people directly involved with the problem. These people had their own constructions about the problem and no matter how coherent and neat the description of the problem that I offered, if it lacked authenticity for them it would fail to carry meaning and value. Ravenette (1999) suggests that 'even when there is apparent agreement between people by virtue of some commonality of language, their disparity is easily discovered by asking of any positive assertion either what it also denies or what else does it further imply' (p.120). What is required is a co-construction of the problem that needs to be developed through a process of checking for meaning and sense making at each step, so that appropriate adjustments and accommodations can be made as necessary. This meeting also raised my awareness of the need to establish the strategies that had already been used, especially where these had been unsuccessful. Through the discussion it became apparent that a strategy of ignoring certain less disruptive behaviours had already been tried but had been found to lead to an increase in the level of disruption. Therefore, school staff considered that it was not appropriate. In the differences column of the PLC I concluded that

*strategies need to be specific to need and jointly decided. I need to know what has been tried previously.*

### *The Strategy*

The actions that I had identified prior to the meeting were:

- to read through case notes prior to the meeting;
- to talk through what I had learnt and check it out with the school and parent, and;
- to discuss possible strategies and check which ones they considered would be suitable.

On reviewing the PLC, I was able to reflect on what my strategies actually were in action. I had read through the consultation notes as planned but decided that to support the flow and efficiency of the meeting it would help to write these out onto the consultation record prior to the meeting. As discussed in the ‘purpose’ section above, during the meeting I became aware of the need to ensure that my construing of the problem was authentic for those present; this required a strategy that emphasised active listening on my part (Rogers, 1961) to others’ views and constructions, not simply looking for agreement or refinement of my own. I was also aware in this meeting that I was offering strategies to address the purposes we had identified but I was not offering these as choices as would be expected if following a coaching model based on S-OL (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995).

### *Outcomes and Review*

The outcome that I had identified prior to the meeting was:

- that the Self-Organised Learning consultation sheet would be filled out with purposes, actions and outcomes completed and fully discussed and agreed by all present.

As I discussed in the 'strategy' section above, I was aware that there was a difference between the intended outcome and the outcome in action because I did not consider that I had been successful in offering options in relation to strategies. On reflection, it seems that although my purpose was to act as a coach/ facilitator in the meeting through the employment of a learning conversation approach, in action I had not yet developed the confidence and facility to operate consistently from this position and, as a result, I was falling back into the more familiar and anticipated territory of expert advice giver; Ravenette (1999) gives a good description of the way that advice giving has been seen as a central role of the EP and Leadbetter (2005) discusses the importance of historicity in understanding how such modes of practice evolve and the way in which 'rules' can continue to maintain them. Using the PLC allowed me to reflect at a deeper level about the processes taking place in the meeting and the way in which I both influence and was influenced by these. Although I may not have been at a stage where I was able easily to move from the position of advice giver to coach I was aware of a need and desire to do so; by continued reflection on what I believe my purposes were and then identifying the difference between these and what my purpose actually was in action, I aimed further to develop my skills and level of awareness in the context of these meetings. Because this shifting of my position from that of an advice giver was a recurring theme through all the PLCs this then has been a focus of a deeper level of reflection which I will discuss further.

### **Further Reflections**

One purpose which is identified in each successive PLC, but which in action I found consistently difficult to carry out, was to offer alternative strategies that represented real choices as opposed to the giving of advice (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995). Despite

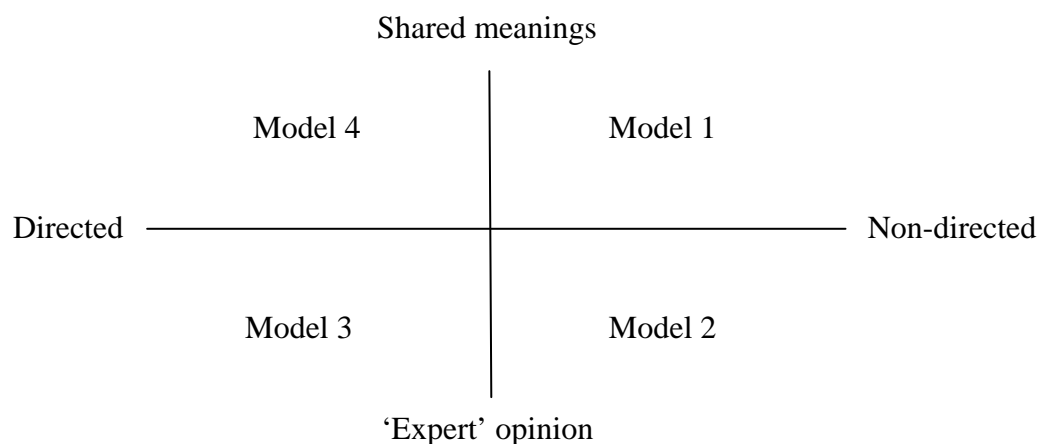
repeated reflection on this purpose prior to the commencement of meetings, during the meeting itself I struggled to resist the expectation within myself which I also perceived to be held by school staff and parents that my role *was* to give advice. Despite a strong belief that I needed to develop my practice away from this, towards the sharing of meanings and understandings, I found this consistently difficult to put into action.

Further reflection on the issue led to a consideration that to effect a change in this area it was probably necessary to look far more broadly at the context, both current and historical, within which I and other EPs in my own and other services are working. My aim was to move away from a paradigm of professional as expert towards a more socially constructed view of the problems presented (Burr, 1995) because I considered that this would promote empowerment and harnessing of inherent capacity of parents and school staff. However, the way that I was carrying out casework at this time reinforced this view: having accepted the referral from the SENCo in the planning meeting I then observed the pupil, perhaps carried out some assessments or other individual work and discussed the problem with the teacher and parent.

Following this there would typically be a meeting with all those involved where there was a clear expectation that as well as sharing what I had learnt, I would advise on what should be done. In addition, there was both the historical context within which EPs have been viewed as experts and the fact that the teaching profession itself works within this model, therefore there is a sense that this reflects a natural order of working; Leadbetter (2005) discusses contradictions in these discussions between EPs and teachers which act as barriers. 'These surround the rules that exist (in particular the employment context for EPs), the tools that are used and what they imply about the nature of the difficulties in question and the expectations about division of labour and role definition for EPs working in a school' (p.25). The problem with this model, however, is that the degree to which meanings are/ are not shared and the extent to which advice is directed/ non-directed can have a big influence on the extent to

which those we are working with are likely to feel a sense of commitment and ownership in the strategies that are identified.

Figure 1 below provides a framework that tries to capture the way that these different dimensions of professional consultation can operate interactionally. The framework places the dimensions of meaning sharing and style of direction on two intersecting continua which form quadrants.



**Figure 1: Dimensions of professional consultation**

My aim was to reposition my model of working in meetings to reflect ‘Model 1’ where meanings are shared, advice is non-directive and ideas are donated in a ‘self-aware’ fashion (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995), whereas, I considered that I was operating a model that fits within ‘Model 4’: I was beginning to share meanings with the problem holders but was operating at the directing end of the directional style continuum. However, in order to move this towards a less directive style I needed to explore the way that my brief was first negotiated with the problem holders, so that the sharing of meaning and negotiation of responsibility for information gathering started much earlier in the process.

## Discussion

The expectation that trainee practitioners will engage in some form of reflection, whether it involves a formally laid out approach such as that described by Samuels and Betts (2007) or the less formal approach of simply filling out a reflective journal or commentary (for example Sutton et al., 2007) has become an integral part of many professional training courses.

However, reflection is taking place in some form or other both in the process of carrying out actions and/or subsequently; it is occurring in formal situations such as supervision, with a tutor or placement supervisor, and in informal situations, for example, travelling home in the car or on the bus. So what is the need for an approach to reflection like S-OL; can the same ends not be achieved through these other processes?

To answer this question it is useful to return to Kelly's (1955) view of people as 'personal scientists' conducting 'learning experiments' through the way they use behaviour to act on their environment, as this lies at the core of S-OL. In a sense, S-OL can be seen as a structured approach to harnessing and extending the learning from these experiments. As Dewey (1933) suggests, reflection is more than simply a stream of consciousness, it has a purpose that is linked to an outcome and it results in action. By identifying that purpose *prior* to the action, the learner is in a position to reflect on the differences between and through this, and gain a deeper insight into the personal meanings which led them to act in the way that they did.

The establishing of deep insights may be harder to achieve with less formal approaches to reflection because as Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) note: 'Often we are only partially aware of the vast and complex system of personal meaning out of which we operate. It can be very difficult to communicate about this meaning with oneself or with others' (p.54). This perspective can be seen to have clear links with Schon's (1987) description of tacit knowledge that practitioners bring to their actions as 'knowing in action'. It is this tacit

knowledge that Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) conceive of as an inner exchange that the learner has with themselves which goes on in parallel to the external exchange: ‘even when ‘fully’ reconstructed, one’s verbal understanding of it necessarily remains incomplete. Its language is largely non-verbal and the deeper contributor to it usually takes little part in the conscious reconstruction’ (p.59).

The use of the S-OL approach in the context of my own personal professional development in the structuring and facilitating of meetings demonstrates how it can contribute to a level of reflection that results in action based on a deeper appreciation of personal meaning. In making the initial decision to use S-OL, the purpose that I identified for doing so was to shift discourse away from one of individual pathologising and regarding the professional as an expert towards a more ecosystemic, social constructionist perspective. Through my own reflections using the PLC, I became aware that my actual purpose, operating at a deeper level of meaning, was to achieve a redistribution of power within these meetings; the result of the cycle of PLCs, using Jay and Johnson’s (2002) typology, was a *critical* reflection achieved through the constant returning to my understanding of the problem.

Habermas (1971) identifies that a critical epistemological position has an emancipatory purpose: this is evident in the differences identified between my initial purposes and my purposes in action. Having initially identified that my purpose was to *increase people’s awareness of the pupil’s problems* (see Appendix 4 purpose/before) by discussing her/his barriers to learning (see Appendix 2), the realisation that this risked perpetuating the emphasis on individual pathology resulted in a shift of focus to include pupil strengths. At a more fundamental level this attempts to re-position the pupil as an individual who has the capacity for personal agency, growth and development, not merely a problem to be diagnosed and cured.

My purpose, however, was not only emancipatory in relation to the pupil, but extended beyond this by seeking to redress the balance of power within meetings in order to move away from a model emphasising the professional as expert. By checking the credibility of my construing of the problem for those directly involved and aiming to offer strategies as choices it was my purpose to achieve a shared construction of meaning which would, in turn, support the selecting of strategies that were congruent with those meanings. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) identify that 'for the construction, reconstruction and exchange of meaning to become Self-Organised Learning' (p.28), the meaning constructed must be personally significant, it must have personal relevance and it must be personally viable. The authors make an important expansion of this point:

'We have suggested that the past experience of each learner provided a unique psychological perspective from within which to construct meaning. This means that even a 'shared experience' will not have the same meaning for each participant in the event' (p.29).

This, they suggest is the reason why physical science takes such meticulous pains to arrive at shared meanings; however, in the social sciences 'in studying people, we have to take fully into account the belief that they will be perceiving the social scientist and having thoughts and feelings about them whilst the social scientist is constructing meaning about them' (p.29).

'Many of the frustrating anomalies of social science disappear if one acknowledges the meaning-constructing capacity of one's subject matter; what you do is to *converse* with them. Once this fundamental shift is made the impossible becomes possible. If we can converse with other people we may be able to understand ourselves and them more clearly' (p.29).

In a sense this gets to the heart of the difficulty I continued to experience in shifting my position away from one of 'professional as expert'. Despite being able to identify robotic actions in the way that I repeatedly fell into the pattern of giving strategies in response to



problems raised by school staff and parents, I seemed unable to find a way to converse with them that allowed the development of a shared understanding and deeper levels of meaning leading to jointly constructed strategies (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991). This difficulty may be understood in terms of the 'learning trough' which Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) see as always being part of the process of significant learning. As robotic skills are brought into awareness and therefore available for revision and development 'the disruption of existing skills produces a drop in effective performance. The learner feels that he or she is getting nowhere and becomes frustrated, hostile and anxious' Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991).

The authors see the Learning Conversation as the means of offering support to the learner to get them through the learning trough and thus avoiding the robot from taking over once more. Of course the much broader issue that I outline in the evaluation is the extent to which social and cultural factors are within the power of the individual to impact upon; this leads me to a consideration of possible limitations that may be identified with the S-OL approach to reflection and learning.

## **Limitations**

Matthews (2010) criticises the model of consultation developed by Clarke and Jenner (2006) because although they acknowledge that social constructionist orientations, like S-OL, lend themselves well to processes of change in complex systems, they have difficulty in providing generalisable outcomes and contributing to an evidence base. 'This is because it does not see outcomes as the result of a 'cause and effect' process that can be reliably triggered in the future' Matthews (2010, p.14). But the use of S-OL in consultation is only one application of the model that we have discussed and, as noted earlier, reflection is a complex process that

cannot easily be observed in terms of cause and effect processes which are then generalisable. Another criticism, however, that it seems important to explore, is the extent to which any one individual is able to effect change in their circumstances through reflection alone, although of course this criticism could be levelled at any other model of reflection.

The current study is limited in its design and implementation in a number of ways, not least by the lack of access to a learning coach as already described. In addition, only four cycles of PLCs are presented here, with deeper analysis of just one of these. A greater level of empirical rigour might be introduced in future by reporting on a greater number of PLCs and by providing some triangulating data. This could take the form of evaluations by service users, eliciting their views on meetings attended. If a learning coach was available their observations of the personal development of the learner could also be elicited.

In evaluating my own reflection using the PLC I explored the underlying reasons for a resistance to the change in my position away from one of professional as expert. It is clear from this example that as an individual there is a limit to one's personal agency in relation to resistant cultural and historical processes, although the development of a deeper level of insight into these may contribute to capacity to subvert some of their limiting influence. S-OL on its own, in this context, is only the beginning of a process that would require an examination of practice at a more systemic level, although there is no reason why it could not be used to inform this larger process.

The fact that I was implementing S-OL without a learning coach is an issue for the fidelity of the current study with the model as described by Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985) and Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995). The lack of a learning coach prevented the initial externalising of the learning conversation, which is a limiting factor because of its link with Kelly's (1955) 'personal constructs.' The learning conversation elicits the individuals'

construct system in the form of purposes, and through this externalisation it allows them to reflect on their own functioning. Thus, although it is clearly possible to employ S-OL individually, and while this is the ultimate aim, the opportunity to reflect in conversation with a skilled coach is important because ‘within a Learning Conversation learners can create opportunities to challenge the underlying values of their myths and experience the excitement of deconstructing and rebuilding new patterns of beliefs and values’ (Harr-Augstein and Webb, 1995, p.16). In addition, the access to a learning coach may have been a helpful model for me in my own efforts to act from the position of a coach in the school action plus meetings.

An issue for the implementation of the personal learning contract to structure the school action plus meetings was the extent to which the service users, the parents and school staff, were involved in shaping the service delivery. I had made the decision to develop this format without consultation, which presents an issue in terms of the balance of power; services are being delivered too, rather than developed with, service users. In the last thirty years there has been a progressive emergence of ideas about the importance of service user views and experiences when planning service policy and delivery. According to Beresford (2001), service user involvement has the potential to lead to more effective and targeted policy and service delivery that meets the needs of users as well as other stakeholders. A problem when implementing new developments as an individual practitioner, is finding efficient, genuine ways of involving service users in shaping practice. A possible future plan to remediate the lack of consultation here could be the use of a simple evaluation with parents and school staff at the end of meetings that might then feed into future revision and development of the review format.

## **Contribution of the Current Study and Future Development**

I believe that the main contribution of the current study to theory development is that it discusses the way in which S-OL represents a fundamentally different approach to reflection because of the way in which it elicits the learners construct system in the form of purposes and allows them to test these out in action. The subsequent reflection on the differences between the learner's purposes prior to action, and then in action, allows them the opportunity to revise their construct system in light of this observation with the aim of becoming more functional. This approach to reflection is contrasted with other approaches with the aim of drawing some distinctions. In addition, the empirical aspect of the study, while limited as previously acknowledged, offers an example to practitioners of how S-OL can be employed as a tool for personal development which has the potential for being deeply meaningful because of its basis in personal construct psychology

The use of a Self-Organised approach to reflection has the potential for development in a number of areas of Educational Psychologist's work both to support the development of their own personal meanings and that of the adults and young people they support. The use of a cycle of PLCs in the context of the present report facilitated a deeper understanding of my own meanings in relation to the operation of power in meetings and the way that pupils with special educational needs are constructed. Within the report I also discussed how I used S-OL in my endeavours to support school staff and parents to identify purposes, strategies and outcomes that will support their own meaning making.

In considering the limitations of the approach I also identified that it could inform change at a systemic level. At another level of EP work, it might also be interesting to explore the use of Self-Organised Approaches with pupils themselves: for example, to support pupils who have

failed to establish functional literacy skills resulting in an alienation towards the learning experience, or to support students to take control of the learning in relation to GCSEs.

## **Conclusion**

The use of Self-Organised Learning to support reflective practice reported in this paper aims to demonstrate the potential that it has for affecting deep, lasting change and the development of new skills that remain adaptive as a result of the conscious, continued engagement in reflection. There are many other valuable approaches to support practitioners in reflecting on their practice; however, by virtue of its basis in the thorough psychological theory of personal constructs developed by Kelly (1955) Self-Organised Learning has the potential to impact at a deep psychological level of personal meaning.

‘We do not necessarily learn from life’s experiences, only through awareness, reflection and review of such encounters from within a conscious system of personal beliefs, values, needs and purposes’ Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991, p.9).

In the context of the work of EPs, which involves sense making in unpredictable and complex situations, Self-Organised Learning can provide a mechanism for the development of deeper insights into the meaning-making of others within these situations and how the EP’s own meanings are both influenced by and influence these in return, leading to greater personal development within practice.

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## **Appendix 1: Self Assessment of Journal Entries from Samuels and Betts (2007)**

Self-assessment of professional development journal entries

*I am reflecting on an experience.*

Did I notice / register what happened?

Did I record how I felt and how I responded?

Did I pay attention to something significant that happened?

Did I value my experience and my response as worth reflecting on and learning from?

*I am reflecting on ideas & concepts that I have read or heard about or thought of myself*

Am I making sense of the ideas by linking them to past experience or learning and to other concepts?

Am I questioning ideas and concepts, testing them against experience and other opinions?

Am I challenging my assumptions and my judgements.

Am I prepared to think about ideas in a new way?

Am I planning ways to try out new ideas in practice?

Am I working out, thinking through action plans?

Have I experimented with new ideas and ways of doing things?

Am I consciously learning from my experiments?

What have I discovered by self-assessing my journal entry and what do I want to do about this?



## Record of School Action Plus Consultation

**School:**

**Name of Pupil:**

**DOB:**

**Age:**

**Year:**

**Date of meeting:**

**Issues raised on school action plus paperwork:**

- 
- 
- 
- 

**Information shared/gathered through consultation, observation relevant additional information:**

- 
- 
- 
-

**People involved in consultation:**

**Date:**

<b>Purpose</b> (what are our shared purposes as a result of the consultation)	<b>Strategies/ Actions</b> (our agreed strategies to achieve the purposes and outcomes)	<b>Expected Outcomes</b> (How will we judge success? Observable/ measurable)

### **Appendix 3: S-OL Record (version 2- final version)**

#### **Record of School Action plus Consultation**

**School:**

**Name of Pupil:**

**DOB:**

**Age:**

**Year:**

**Date of meeting:**

**1. Information shared/gathered through consultation, SA+ Paperwork , observation**

**relevant additional information:**

- **Strengths**

- 

- 

- 

- 

- **Barriers/ difficulties**

- 

- 

- 

- 

- **Previous strategies / interventions**

- 

- 

-

## 2. Planning group learning contract

**People involved in consultation:**

**Review Date:**

<b>Purpose</b> (what are our shared purposes as a result of the consultation)	<b>Strategies/ Actions</b> (our agreed strategies to achieve the purposes and outcomes)	<b>Expected Outcomes</b> (How will we judge success? Observable/ measurable)

## **Appendix 4**

### **Notes on the management of the meeting leading to the first completed PLC**

This meeting took place in a High School and apart from myself was attended by the pupil's mother, the head of inclusion, the head of year and a member of the pastoral support staff.

The pupil concerned had been causing concerns both in school and at home because of his behaviour and this meeting was an initial school action plus meeting to discuss the concerns and feedback on the work I had done with the pupil and adults involved.

In the meeting I began by feeding back on the issues raised in the school action plus paperwork and then the information that had been gathered through my involvement. During the process of feeding back and the subsequent discussion I became increasingly aware of the fact that it was centring on the pupil's difficulties with little or no recognition of his strengths; this was therefore in contradiction of my underlying social constructionist, interpretivist epistemological position. In addition this epistemological position is not necessarily familiar to the other participants in the meeting and therefore it was not initially easy for them to engage comfortably in the process of meaning sharing. I was aware that in order to increase their comfort and confidence in the process I needed to develop my own confidence to deal with the uncertainty of this type of meeting and my confidence to act as a coach as opposed to an expert advice giver. As the meeting progressed, however, I felt that it was possible to engage in some meaning sharing and we were able jointly to identify some purposes and strategies to achieve these. All the participants in the meeting did contribute, although I felt that I was only partially successful in avoiding being directive.

## Appendix 4 (cont)

### The Personal Learning Contract

Date complied.....13/10/09.....

Date of Review.....13/10/09.....

	Before	In Action	Difference	
<b>Purpose</b>	<b>What are my purposes?</b> To get all those present in the meeting focused on problem solving. To increase people's level of awareness of the pupil's problems. To jointly negotiate strategies.	<b>What actually was my purpose?</b> The purposes were the same in action as before.	<b>Differences?</b> None.	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>What actions?</b> Use the personal learning contract format to structure the meeting. Offer alternatives and avoid giving direction. Use questioning to elicit learning myths related to the pupil.	<b>What did I do?</b> The personal learning contract was used successfully. I felt that I did do some directing but that I was able to promote others in the meeting to take some control. I tried to elicit learning myths but was not entirely successful.	<b>Differences?</b> There were no differences between before and in action. There was some directing by me. The eliciting of learning myths was only partially successful. Part of the problem is that the S-OL consultation format only identifies the pupil's difficulties – it also needs to identify their strengths.	<b>Strategy</b>
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>How shall I judge my success?</b> Produce a personal learning contract with clear purposes, strategies and outcomes. All participants to have contributed. To have been able to act as a coach.	<b>How well did I do?</b> The purposes may need to be further broken down but they were offered by the group not myself. All participants did contribute. Some aspects of my style/ role were coach orientated.	<b>Differences?</b> Broad purposes linked to explicit strategies and less specific outcomes. Not entirely coach orientated in role.	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Review</b>				
<b>What are my strengths?</b> I was able to use the personal learning contract structure to manage the meeting. I was able to facilitate contributions from all those present.		<b>What are my weaknesses?</b> I need to develop greater confidence to adopt a coaching role and stick with it. I need to elicit clearer purposes and linked strategies and outcomes.		
<b>What next? Plan next PLC</b>				

## Appendix 5

### The Personal Learning Contract

Date complied.....28/1/10.....

Date of Review.....3/2/10.....

	Before	In Action	Difference	
Purpose	<b>What are my purposes?</b>  To share the pupil’s strengths and barriers with school and parent. To effectively communicate what I have learnt. To facilitate the selecting of appropriate strategies.	<b>What actually was my purpose?</b> To share strengths and increase understanding of barriers. To communicate what I have learnt and ensure its authenticity for others. Strategies that relate to an understanding of the child’s difficulties. I need to be aware of strategies which have already been used, especially if these have been unsuccessful.	<b>Differences?</b>  Need to focus on the understanding to help develop reflection. Need to make sure that my construing of the situation makes sense to others. Strategies need to be specific to need and jointly decided. I need to know what has been tried previously.	Purpose
Strategy	<b>What actions?</b> Read through case notes prior to the meeting. Talk through what I have learnt and check it out with school and parent. Discuss possible strategies and check which ones they feel would be suitable.	<b>What did I do?</b> Read through notes and carefully prepare school action plus consultation sheet. Checked out with both school and parent and took time to listen as well as talk. Offered strategies but did not offer options.	<b>Differences?</b> Carefully filled out first part of consultation sheet prior to meeting. Taking time in meetings to actively listen to what others are saying. I did not offer options.	Strategy
Outcome	<b>How shall I judge my success?</b> SO-L consultation sheet filled out with purposes, actions and outcomes completed and fully discussed and agreed by all present.	<b>How well did I do?</b>  S-OL consultation sheet was filled out and PAO completed, discussed and agreed but I need to make sure that I give options rather than donating ideas.	<b>Differences?</b>  I need to offer options in relation to strategies/ actions.	Outcome
Review				
<b>What are my strengths?</b> I am able to listen actively. I am able to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and understanding about the child and the situation.		<b>What are my weaknesses?</b> I need to work on my ability to offer options – not just donate strategies. I need to work on communicating clearly what I have learnt.		
What next? Plan next PLC				

## Appendix 6

### The Personal Learning Contract

Date complied.....9/3/10.....

Date of Review.....9/3/10.....

	Before	In Action	Difference	
<b>Purpose</b>	<b>What are my purposes?</b> To share the pupil's strengths and barriers with school and parents and increase their understanding of their impact. To facilitate the identification of strategies that are jointly agreed and relate to an understanding of the difficulties.	<b>What actually was my purpose?</b> My purpose was to share the strengths and barriers with school and increase their understanding of their impact. I did link strategies to the difficulties and they were agreed, however I did donate strategies.	<b>Differences?</b> I am donating strategies rather than offering choices that are jointly agreed, however I did remain open to strategies being rejected and indeed one was perceived by school not to be useful and therefore was put aside.	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>What actions?</b> Fill out the school action plus S-OL prior to the meeting and think about how I will increase understanding of the barriers. Take time over strategies: don't feel pressurised to get through quickly. Discuss them fully with school and parents.	<b>What did I do?</b> I spent time filling out the pro-forma and jotting down strategies to offer as choices in the meeting but in the meeting I donated these ideas rather than eliciting ideas and offering choice. I did take time over the strategies and I did discuss them fully with school and the pupil's parents.	<b>Differences?</b> I am continuing to donate ideas as opposed to offering real choices.	<b>Strategy</b>
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>How shall I judge my success?</b> Time taken to clearly explain the barriers the pupil is experiencing. Time taken to link strategies to the barriers. Give options and ensure that parents and school feel in control.	<b>How well did I do?</b> I discussed the barriers identified by school and from my involvement. I particularly spent time explaining Dynamic Assessment work done with the pupil and implications of what I found from this for the pupil's learning; I linked the strategies to this work but I did not offer options.	<b>Differences?</b> Barriers were explained and time was taken to link strategies to barriers. I did not offer options however parent and school did reject one strategy and seemed happy with the others that were offered.	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Review</b>				
<b>What are my strengths?</b> I was able to link the strategies to my explanation of the barriers successfully. I was able to give clear explanations of the barriers.		<b>What are my weaknesses?</b> I need to consider ways in which I can offer strategies that allow school and parents to make a real choice.		
<b>What next? Plan next PLC</b>				



## Appendix 7

## The Personal Learning Contract

Date complied.....17/3/10.....

Date of Review.....19/3/10.....

	Before	In Action	Difference	
<b>Purpose</b>	<b>What are my purposes?</b> To share the pupil's strengths and barriers with school and parents and increase their understanding of their impact. To facilitate the identification of jointly agreed strategies that are relate to an understanding of the pupil's difficulties.	<b>What actually was my purpose?</b> I shared the pupil's strengths and barriers. In addition to the purpose of increasing their understanding I also found that my purpose was also to develop parent's and school's understanding and appreciation of the other's perspective. My purpose was to identify jointly agrees strategies that related to the pupil's difficulties.	<b>Differences?</b> The main difference was that as well as wanting to increase an understanding of the pupil's difficulties, I wanted to facilitate a sharing of the differing perspectives of school and parent so that an open dialogue could be engaged in leading to greater levels of understanding and commitment the strategies agreed.	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>What actions?</b> Fill out the school action plus S-OL prior to the meeting and think about how I will increase understanding of the barriers. Take time over strategies: don't feel pressurised to get through quickly. Create a list of possible strategies prior to the meeting that can be offered as options. Discuss them fully with school and parents.	<b>What did I do?</b> I filled out the school action plus S-OL prior to the meeting and thought about the barriers. I took time over the strategies and I created a list prior to the meeting to offer as options. In the meeting although my purpose was to offer choices I found it very difficult to do this in action because I was presented with very specific instances of times when the pupil's behaviour presented a challenge and therefore found that I was offering strategies in direct response to this rather than offering choices.	<b>Differences?</b> I am still donating strategies in response to the expectations of others that I provide clear advice. I need to develop the skills not to get drawn in these situations but rather to elicit solutions from those presenting the problems eg by asking 'so what do you think you could do in that situation to improve it?' I feel that this skill is key to my further development and needs to worked on through future cycles of the PLC	<b>Strategy</b>
<b>Outcome</b>	<b>How shall I judge my success?</b> Time taken to clearly explain the barriers the pupil is experiencing. Time taken to link the strategies to the barriers. Strategies offered as options so that parents and school have control over the process.	<b>How well did I do?</b> Time was taken and I felt that there was a much greater level of understanding of both the pupil's difficulties and the perspectives of school and parent. I tried to offer strategies as options but continued to be drawn into the position of advice giver.	<b>Differences?</b> I am still offering strategies as advice rather than as choices. I have been able to facilitate a greater level of understanding of the perspectives of school and parent.	<b>Outcome</b>
<b>Review</b>				
<b>What are my strengths?</b> Ability to facilitate the sharing of school and parent perspectives. Ability to share and develop understanding of the pupil's difficulties.		<b>What are my weaknesses?</b> I find it difficult to resist being positioned as an advice giver and need to develop confidence to stick to my purpose.		
<b>What next? Plan next PLC</b>				

## **Professional Practice Report 5**

### **A critical evaluation of a Specialised work experience applying CBT to support GCSE students cope with exam anxiety and consideration of the implications of carrying out real world evaluations in practice by Educational Psychologist**

#### **Abstract**

This professional practice report describes the design and implementation of a group programme using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). The program was aimed at supporting year 11 students tackle exam related anxiety leading up to their GCSE examinations. The programme was adapted from Stallard (2002) and was designed to be delivered as two hour long sessions during school time to approximately ten pupils. The sessions were supported by a power point presentation and used a combination of didactic content delivery, small group work, small and whole group discussion and homework. The sessions were evaluated using pupil surveys, Personal Learning Contracts (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995) completed by the facilitator, and additional qualitative observations produced at the end of each session. Outcomes of the programme and the complexities of 'Realistic Evaluations' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) are discussed.

## **Introduction**

This professional practice report discusses the design, implementation and evaluation of a piece of specialized group work using Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) approaches. The programme was designed to support a group of Year 11 pupils put strategies into place to cope with exam anxiety. This work was negotiated with a high school that the author, a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), supports; it emerged from casework involving a young man with a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) for Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD). At the pupil's annual review, his difficulties in coping with exam and test situations were discussed; he was an able pupil and would be expected to achieve a number of GCSEs, but this was being put in doubt by his fear of failure leading to self sabotaging behaviour in exam situations. A previous offer to the pupil to meet with the TEP in school had been refused as had a subsequent offer to meet outside school at the Psychology and Specialist Outreach offices. In discussion with the pupil's mother and the school's SENCo, it was decided to offer a group session in school to be presented as 'Strategies for Success'; this would be offered to other Year 11 pupils who were experiencing exam anxiety as well as this pupil, thus avoiding singling him out for specific attention. Rossello et al. (2008) suggest that because of the developmental stage of adolescence, peers are considered an important source of feedback and support and a group approach 'can provide a scenario in which to observe, learn, and practice new skills in a safe environment' (p.235). In addition, a review of evidence by Compton et al. (2002) found that 'cognitive-behavioural interventions for childhood anxiety disorders are the most promising psychosocial treatments for childhood internalizing disorders' (p.1262). This study and others discussed below suggest that CBT may be a useful approach for tackling anxiety in children

and adolescents and thus an appropriate model to use for designing the sessions to support pupils with exam anxiety.

The following report describes how, in response to the initial identified need, the CBT programme was developed to be delivered to a group of pupils in two sessions, in the school setting and during the school day. A decision was made to evaluate the programme; the design and the tools used to do this are described. However, during implementation there was an attrition rate of over 70% in the second session for an ostensible reason which rendered the original evaluation design and results of limited value. This led to a subsequent consideration of the issues of successful programme implementation, negotiation and evaluation that could lead to the development of a viable future study.

The report begins by reviewing literature related to the use of CBT with children and adolescents, its use in group work and its use to address anxiety; literature on exam and test related anxiety is also discussed. There then follows a consideration of the issues of evaluating programmes in the 'real world.' Two models of evaluation are considered: a 'realistic' or 'programme theory' model of evaluation and a 'results' model. This is followed by a description of the current study: its methods and design, and the subsequent evaluation results. The discussion considers the current study and uses it to suggest how a more effective evaluation study could be developed in the future using realistic evaluation as a framework.

### **Literature Review**

There are three areas of literature which are relevant to this practice report and each is covered in a brief overview below. These areas are: using CBT in group work; using CBT with young people experiencing anxiety and stress; and exam and test anxiety. An advanced search of Assia looking for papers related to these areas from 1990 to 2010 was carried out; all the papers relevant to this study are discussed. The majority of the studies take the form of

randomized control trials with pre and post test measures. The limitations of this type of evaluated study in relation to the real world context of Educational Psychology practice and research in schools is discussed later.

### *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Group Work*

Ruffolo and Fischer (2009) report on a study in the USA to implement an adapted CBT model with adolescents with depression. Sixty students aged between 11 and 18 attending three different schools took part. The aim of the study was to evaluate the use of an evidence based group intervention when it was moved from a clinical setting to a school based setting and adapted to be compatible with the real world constraints e.g. cutting session times from 2 hours to 45 minutes to fit the school's timetable and from 16 weeks to 9 weeks to fit in with the school term. The authors report that by comparing pre and post measures on a variety of diagnostic scales, significant decreases in depression were achieved. In addition, teachers reported improvements in class participation and attendance by the students while they were attending the CBT sessions. Qualitative comments by the students at the end of the nine weeks indicate that they had found the sessions helpful and would recommend them to others. At six weeks follow up, the adolescents still reported positive changes but the differences on the measures were no longer significant. However, the implementation of the approach required a high degree of training and supervision for the social workers carrying it out. Although it is a useful example of transferring a CBT group approach into a school setting and elements of it could be adapted, overall it would not be a suitable model for the exam anxiety sessions.

Thienemann et al. (2001), report on a study using an adapted CBT protocol in a group format for adolescents with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). 18 adolescents aged 13 to 17 years with OCD received a 14-week group CBT session; the maximum group size was nine

patients. Diagnostic measures of the patients' OCD symptoms showed significant improvement, both statistically and clinically. The authors also comment that the adolescents consistently shared information and designed exposure interventions for themselves and others during the sessions. In addition, repeated self-report measures confirmed adolescents' satisfaction with the therapy. The mutual support that the adolescents are reported to have provided to each other in the sessions confirms the suggestion by Rossello et al. (2008) discussed above that this is predicted by their developmental stage. This aspect of the study is clearly relevant to developing sessions with Year 11 students, however in other respects, for example the length of the sessions and the clinical diagnoses of the adolescents it has less relevance.

A later report, by Martin and Thienemann (2005) describes a similar study but involving a younger age group. A naturalistic pilot of a group CBT intervention for children with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) was carried out. Fourteen children, aged between 8 and 14 years received the intervention in groups of 4 to 6, in weekly, 90 minute sessions over 14 weeks. Although the authors report a statistical and clinical improvement on OCD measures for the participants and self reported decreases in depression, the expected additive impact of running the sessions as a group did not occur. The authors refer to the earlier CBT group study (Thienemann et al., 2001; cited in Martin and Thienemann, 2005); they had hoped that a group format for this later study would also support symptom improvement but found that younger children 'were more limited in their ability to help each other problem solve about cognitive strategies and design exposure exercises to address OCD symptoms' (p.122). In the same respect as the paper by Thienemann et al. (2001) this paper provides useful insights into factors that may help to theorize about what works in terms of CBT group delivery but again

like the earlier paper the context of the programme delivery is less relevant to the proposed study.

In a randomized trial that compared CBT and Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) with depressed adolescents, Rossello et al. (2008) found that CBT resulted in significantly greater decreases in depressive symptoms and improved self concept when compared to IPT. However they found that there were no differences in post treatment effect between those that had been assigned to individual and those that had been assigned to group treatment conditions for either intervention. From their clinical observations they report that ‘many adolescents were somewhat reluctant to enter the group format due to issues of confidentiality, particularly if there were students from their own high school in the group’ (p.243). However, there are a number of issues with the implementation of the group programmes in this study. Firstly the adolescents who took part were aged between 12 and 18 years and in each of the group situations there was a six year age spread between members with numbers of only 3 to 4 in each group following attrition. The group sessions were two hours long and were delivered weekly for 12 weeks. The large age gap, small group size and length of sessions could be a factor that acted to decrease the potential efficacy of the group situation because these adolescents are likely to have quite different developmental needs and concentration spans.

Vickers (2002) reports on a study using a 12 week group CBT approach, delivered weekly with 8 adolescents. The ages of the participants was 14 to 16 years; they had a range of psychiatric and developmental disorders which Vickers (2002) suggests differs from previous studies because they tend to involve young people with the same conditions. In addition ‘attention is directed explicitly at the function of the *group* per se as a curative factor’

(p. 251). The outcomes were assessed in terms of the attendance rate, self rating on a three point scale devised to describe clinical change as either mild, moderate or major improvement and qualitative clinical change during the course of the intervention reported by the author in the form of a brief vignette for each participant. The results showed an average attendance rate for the group of 88.5%. Six subjects (75%) reported major improvement, while 2 subjects (25%) reported a moderate improvement on the self report measure. This study focuses in great depth on the gains of the individual members and is a good example of how CBT and group processes can operate differentially for individuals depending on individual needs. There are some useful insights for the development of the current study in terms of the qualitative assessments; however this programme took place over twelve weeks which allowed a lot of opportunity for these clinical observations.

The implications and relevance of these studies for the evaluation reported on in this paper will be picked up later in a discussion about conducting programme evaluations in the ‘real world.’

### *Exam and Test Anxiety*

In reviewing previous studies on test anxiety, McDonald (2001) makes the important observation that a substantial number have been carried out with college students who have left compulsory education. He goes onto suggest that:

‘If test anxiety has a significant effect on performance in younger children, highly test anxious individuals could be under represented for two reasons. First, when given the choice they may have removed themselves from the education system due to their fear of exams. Secondly, the hypothesized detrimental effects of test anxiety may have presented a barrier to them progressing further in their studies’ McDonald (2001, p. 89).



Orbach et al. (2006) report on a study using an internet based CBT intervention with college students who experienced exam anxiety. Ninety participants were enrolled and half were allocated to the treatment group receiving the CBT intervention; the other half were allocated to a group receiving a control program. The participants were given pre and post intervention measures which included the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI) and an Anxiety Hierarchy Questionnaire (AHQ). According to the TAI, 53% of the CBT group showed a reliable and clinically significant improvement with treatment but only 29% of the control group showed such a change. On the AHQ 67% of the CBT group and 36% of the control group showed a clinically significant improvement. The authors suggest that it would also be important to determine the effectiveness of the program for other groups 'including less able students for whom test anxiety is most disruptive' (p.494). The findings from this study are promising and it would be interesting to see what impact this type of program would have if it were adapted to be used by young people in the age range of the current study. This could offer an accessible and inexpensive alternative approach to providing therapeutic support without the need for face to face engagement; especially as this may be an issue for some young people experiencing anxiety.

Da Fonseca et al. (2008) report on a study involving adolescents with a General Anxiety Disorder (GAD), to test if their implicit beliefs about intelligence could be manipulated to effect IQ test performances. They point to the findings of CBT studies that report positive effects on adolescents with anxiety and suggest that an important aspect of this is the challenging of negative automatic thoughts (NATs) that lead to problem behaviours. These NATs are related to core beliefs; the authors suggest that a social-cognitive model of achievement and motivation proposes that in academic situations a child's behaviour is dictated by several beliefs, one of which is their implicit theory about intelligence. 'Entity

theorists believe that this ability is stable and not particularly amenable to change, whereas incremental theorists believe that it is malleable and highly amenable to change' (p.530). Their study involved 28 volunteers aged between 11 and 16 who were diagnosed with GAD according to DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. Participants were tested individually by an experimenter in a laboratory using the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, 1983) and then asked to carry out a task: the coding test from the WISC III (Wechsler, 1996). Following this, participants were either assigned to a control group or they were assigned to the incremental theory condition. In the latter case, 'the experimenter provided participants with a written form containing the implicit theory manipulation' (p.532). This manipulation basically suggested to the participants that performance on the test was not fixed but modifiable dependent on effort. Those in the control group did not receive the manipulation. Following this both the anxiety inventory and the Coding test were re-administered. The authors report that the intervention group showed better IQ performance and decreased state anxiety. They go on to suggest that the study is very useful to these particular adolescents because:

'GAD adolescents are likely to experience worry, particularly in terms of achievement, because they perceive contexts in which achievement is important as threatening' (p.534).

In addition, the thoughts of people suffering from anxiety tend to focus on fear of failure or negative comparisons of themselves in relation to their peers. However, when, as in this case, 'the testing context emphasizes an incremental view of intelligence they tend to be more concerned with learning new concepts and improving their competence' (p. 534) because they are encouraged to focus on. The potential malleability of adolescents' theories about intelligence is clearly important and may be a mechanism that impacts significantly on young

people's likely engagement with a programme. However, it is easy to understand how an incremental theory of intelligence might be helpful in completing IQ tests where no prior learning is required; it seems likely that it would be less helpful shortly before an exam requiring the demonstration of knowledge acquisition and skills learning. Although, if it were introduced sufficiently in advance of exams, this might give young people time to put it into practice as a means of support in the development of a positive approach to the activity of acquiring and retaining new learning.

### *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Anxiety*

Ishikawa et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 20 randomised controlled studies of CBT for anxiety disorders in children and adolescents. They suggest that the results strongly support the effectiveness of CBT for anxious children and in addition follow ups of the studies of between 3 and 24 months all showed a significant effect size. However, the authors acknowledge that none of the studies were able to offer controls for these follow up effects because all the studies had used a wait list design. In addition, all the participants in these studies had a clinical diagnosis; over half the studies took place in a University clinic or hospital, the number of sessions ranged from 6 to 24 and the children were referred by their parents.

Flannery-Schroeder and Kendall (2000) report on a study conducted with 37 children aged 8-14 who had been referred by a clinic with anxiety disorders. These children were randomly assigned to CBT individual treatment, CBT group treatment or a wait list control group. All the children met DSM-IV criteria for an anxiety disorder and completed an 18 week intervention. At the end of the intervention period all the children were assessed again for anxiety disorder. Post-treatment 73% of those children receiving individual CBT and 50% of

those receiving group CBT no longer met diagnostic criteria whereas this was the case for only 8% of the wait-list control group. In addition ‘Significant improvements were found in multiple child- and parent-reports of anxious distress and coping for both ICBT and GCBT relative to the WL control condition’ (p.271). However, the sample size involved in this randomised trial is small, especially when using statistical analysis. In addition, there was an attrition rate of 31% from the individual treatment condition and none from the group condition which is an interesting observation that the authors do not explore. A final point is that the group sessions lasted 90 minutes compared to 50 to 60 minutes for the individual sessions. These group sessions are very long particularly for the younger participants and may have made demands on their level of concentration and engagement that impacted on the results.

Sauter et al. (2009) in a review of literature look at the unique developmental characteristics of adolescents when designing CBT interventions suggest that CBT is one of the most popular interventions for adolescent anxiety. However, the fact that a significant proportion report anxiety symptoms post-treatment, ‘underscores the need to attend to the unique developmental characteristics of the adolescent period when designing and delivering treatment, in an effort to enhance treatment effectiveness.’ (p.310). The authors go on to suggest that the developmental processes of adolescence can both offer opportunities for changing trajectories but can also impact on the way young people engage with the treatment process: ‘for example, the developing need for autonomy can make it difficult for some young people to acknowledge the need for treatment and to accept ‘help’ (p.313).

A study by Legerstee et al. (2010) similarly recognises the benefit of CBT for children with anxiety disorders, but also recognises that a proportion either do not benefit, or benefit only partially from treatment. They hypothesize that selective attention towards threat is involved

in causing and maintaining anxiety disorders and therefore may be an essential process promoting anxiety changes during CBT.

Herbet et al. (2009) point to a growing literature supporting the use of CBT for anxiety disorders in adolescents but find that there is less literature in relation to Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). The authors describe a randomised control trial involving adolescents with SAD to compare the efficacy of group versus individual CBT in relation to a psycho-educational and supportive programme. All participants met criteria for a diagnosis of SAD according to DSM-IV criteria. They were aged 12 to 17 and were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions carried out over 12 weeks: group CBT; individual CBT; or educational and psycho-educational supportive therapy. Significantly, at a 6 month follow up the recovery rate for those adolescents who had taken part in the group CBT was significantly higher at 54% than those who had taken part in individual CBT (15%) and the psycho-educational programme (19%). The authors hypothesise that the additional exposure to social stimuli offered by the group CBT resulted in a high percentage making clinically significant gains.

### **Evaluating Interventions in the Real World**

The programme implementation and evaluation reported on here differs from the majority of those discussed in the literature reviewed above in a number of key aspects. Firstly, this programme was developed in response to a perceived need identified through a piece of casework and was designed to be practicable to carry out in a school setting in two, hour long sessions and the evaluation was designed subsequent to the programme design. Conversely, many of the studies in the literature were set up specifically to evaluate the efficacy of a CBT programme with identified clinical populations, so the evaluation can be seen to either have

come first, followed by the selection of a programme, or it is an integral part of the programme implementation (e.g. Vickers, 2002). In addition, all of the programs were delivered in six or more sessions over a period of weeks. Apart from the study by Ruffolo and Fischer (2009) all the studies took place in either clinical or university settings.

In the current programme pupils who might potentially benefit were identified by the school's SENCo and were given letters inviting them to participate with parental permission. The majority of the young people in the literature had been referred to services by their parents, with the exception of Ruffolo and Fischer (2009) where some teacher and student self referrals are also reported. All the young people in the literature had a clinical diagnosis which they had received prior to the intervention or in some cases they were assessed using standardized scales as part of the selection criteria for participation (e.g. Ruffolo and Fischer, 2009). Finally the majority of the evaluation studies in the literature take the form of randomized control trials where participants are randomly assigned to a treatment or control group (commonly either a different intervention or a wait list). Most of the studies used standardized measures to compare pre test, baseline scores with post test scores and some also incorporated follow up measures.

In the introduction, issues with the programme evaluation were flagged up, but before moving on to discuss this in more detail, two models of evaluation are discussed and their potential relevance for the design of a future study; this is expanded later in the discussion by looking at one of the models in the context of the results from the current study.

Hansen (2005) argues that designs 'should be determined by the purpose of the evaluation, the object of evaluation or the problem to be solved by the evaluated programme' (p.447). She discusses a number of different models of evaluation including 'results' models and 'programme theory' models and it is these that we are going to consider.

A 'results' model of evaluation, or 'goal attainment' model is appropriate where the question being asked is the degree to which the goal has been realized and the criteria for evaluation are derived from the goals themselves. This model is therefore summative and focuses on the results of a given programme. Hansen (2005) identifies a number of sub-categories of the results model:

'In the goal-attainment model, which is the classic model in the literature on programme evaluation and organizational evaluation, results are assessed only in relation to the predetermined goals. The evaluator closely scrutinizes the object of evaluation in relation to its goals' (p.449).

The randomized control trials described in the literature review above are goal-attainment models of evaluation, their purpose is control and Hansen (2005) suggests that their primary emphasis is on quantitative measurement of effects; this is clearly evident in the design of these studies. However, there are issues with this model because it is premised on the existence of reliable methods of measuring the results and those in control of the evaluation having 'insight into the world of those subject to evaluation' (p.452). Additionally, goal-attainment models are only appropriate if the goals themselves are clear. Pawson and Tilley (1997) suggest that the point of this experimental method of evaluation 'is to attempt to exclude every conceivable rival causal agent from the experiment so that we are left with one, secure causal link' (p.5). However, they concede that experimentalists do acknowledge that there is an ontological distinction to be drawn between their work in the laboratory and in the field: 'the social world is inherently 'complex', 'open', 'dynamic' and so forth. This renders the clear-cut 'program causes outcome' conclusion much more problematic in the messy world of field experiments' (p.5).

The question that must be considered in reviewing the studies in the literature, which are predominantly based on this goal-attainment model, is what their relevance is for the work of Educational Psychologists working in the context of schools. In this context, the level of

control over programme conditions achieved in these studies would be extremely difficult to put in place, and of questionable value because they fail to reflect the real world conditions of day to day practice. A results model of evaluation, therefore, appears unlikely to be an appropriate basis for a future planned evaluation of the exam anxiety programme; the other, 'programme theory' model, also has potential drawbacks but may be more applicable to the real world.

The 'programme theory' model of evaluation is theory based and asks the questions 'what works for whom in which context?' and 'is it possible to ascertain errors in the programme theory?' (p.449). The criteria for evaluating the programme is that the theory is assessed and reconstructed as a result of empirical analysis. Educational Psychologists, who cannot retreat into the predictable, controllable world of the clinic or laboratory, need realistic evaluations that can provide an evidence base that takes account of the complex school environments that they work in. Pawson and Tilley's (1997) 'scientific realism' is a 'programme theory' model of evaluation that offers a solution to this epistemological problem. They state that its key feature is the stressing of the mechanics of explanations. In contrast to the *successionist* understanding of causation, used in the goal-attainment model of experimental evaluation, where 'the key is to establish a controlled sequence of observations which differentiate the causal relationship from the spurious association' (p.32), realism relies on a *generative* understanding of causation. This stresses that causality involves the internal potential of a system being activated in the right conditions. They provide the following equation by way of explanation: *'outcome = mechanism + context'*. In other words, programs work (have successful 'outcomes') only in so far as they introduce the appropriate ideas and opportunities ('mechanisms') to groups in the appropriate social and cultural conditions ('contexts')' (p.57).



In realistic evaluation projects, the programme design is linked to relevant theory and research literature. In the construction stage of the programme, ‘a realistic evaluation-oriented literature review would have suggested contexts, mechanisms and outcomes associated with the most effective [*programme*]’ Timmins and Miller (2007, p.11). This can be demonstrated by considering the literature reviewed above for CBT and groups and identifying the contexts (C), mechanisms (M) and outcomes (O) of those studies that were successful. See table 1 below.

<b>Article</b>	<b>Contexts</b>	<b>Mechanisms</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Ruffolo, M.C. and Fischer, D. (2009)	Group session in a school setting. 45 minutes a week over nine weeks. During school day and did not interfere with other classes	Students reported making friends in the group. At the end students were able to identify at least one adult they could talk to when feeling down.	High levels of attendance at the groups. Decreases in depression measured using diagnostic tests. Improvements in class attendance and participation.
Thienemann et al (2001)	Group session with adolescents aged 13 to 17 with OCD diagnosis. Weekly sessions: programme lasted 14 weeks	Adolescents consistently shared information and designed exposure interventions for themselves and others during sessions.	OCD symptoms showed significant improvement, both statistically and clinically.
Vickers, B. (2002)	Group sessions lasting 1 ½ hours each, once a week after school over 12 weeks. 8 adolescents aged 14-16 with a range of diagnoses.	Adolescents with difficulties in social relating appear to benefit from the presence of peers and the group process.	Average attendance of 88%. 75% self reported major improvement 25% report moderate improvement. Most marked change for adolescents whose primary deficits were in area social relating.

**Table 1: CBT group studies that had successful outcomes showing CMOs.**

This identification of CMOs in successful CBT group interventions could then be used to develop a programme theory which could be used to inform the development of the CBT exam anxiety programme. There are clearly implications of applicability of the above studies for the current programme but this is only offered as an example. The application of program theory is considered in more detail in the context of the current study in the later discussion.

### **Setting up the Group Sessions**

The sessions were planned to take place during the first half of the summer term to prepare the participating pupils for forthcoming GCSE exams. The school's SENCo identified a number of pupils who she felt might benefit from the sessions; letters were given to these pupils to explain to them and their parents the content and purpose of the sessions and to gain parental consent should the pupil wish to participate (see appendix 1). Participation was thus on a voluntary basis. It follows from this that the pupil for whom the sessions were initially proposed might choose not to participate, however the opportunity for support would have been made available and the sessions would constitute a useful contribution to psychological support to the school. The sessions were planned to take place during the school day and a time had been agreed with the head of year when they would cause minimum disruption to the timetable. The use of the school's library had been secured as a venue for the sessions to take place (see appendix 5 for a fuller description of the group sessions).

### **Methodology and Design**

The research design uses a mixed methods approach, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. As described earlier this work emerged from a piece of case work, it is

positioned firmly in the real world and unlike other studies designed to assess the efficacy of a CBT approach it does not use experimental methods and makes no claims in respect of generalizability. It is hoped that in describing and evaluating the researcher's own practice there may be useful insights that will be of interest to others. Given the limitations implied by research into practice carried out in the real world, the evaluation questions are also by definition limited by the constraints of that situation. The report aims to answer the following questions:

- Is a group intervention based on CBT approaches perceived as helpful in dealing with exam related anxiety by the pupils participating?
- Is a group intervention based on CBT approaches perceived by the adults delivering it to be helpful?
- What is perceived to be the most useful aspect of the intervention for pupils?
- What is the level of attendance?

### **Evaluation tools**

An evaluation questionnaire was designed to be given to the participating pupils at the end of the second session. This questionnaire was constructed to be simple and quick to fill in with a minimum requirement on literacy skills because some of the pupils in the group had literacy difficulties and the time available was limited. There were a total of five questions requiring a rating response on a Likert scale or circling responses from a range of choices (see appendix 6).

Personal Learning Contracts (Harri-Augstein and Webb, 1995) were used to support the reflection on the process by the author; this is a tool for reflection developed by Harri-Augstein and Webb (1995) to support Self-Organised Learning. Self-Organised Learning

(1995) involves the engagement in a learning conversation by the actor, prior to action which identifies purposes, strategies to achieve these and outcomes. There are three stages of the learning conversation, a planning stage, an action stage and a review stage; each stage of the process can be supported by the use of a Personal Learning Contract (see appendix 7 and 8). In addition, qualitative notes were made at the end of each of the sessions to add additional contextual information to the above methods (appendix 9).

### **Ethical considerations**

A letter was given to pupils who the school's SENCo identified might benefit from these sessions (see appendix 1). This letter addressed both the pupils and their parents and it described the purpose and content of the sessions, who would be delivering them, where and when they would take place and how much of the school timetable they would take up. Consent was given by returning a reply slip to the school. The study refers to the Ethical Guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2004). These guidelines stipulate that informed and recorded consent should be obtained prior to the carrying out of research with any human subjects, therefore the letter also requested permission for the pupil's participation in an evaluation of the study (see appendix 6). This outlined the purpose of the evaluation and it also covered the following points:

- The anonymity and confidentiality of the pupil was assured – no names would be used in the write up;
- The pupil's permission would also be sought before using the data they provided;
- The pupil and parents could request withdrawal from the study at any time before, during or after it had take place (in the latter case any data provided would not be used in the final write up).

## Evaluation Results

### *Qualitative Observations*

A description of the delivery of the two group sessions in practice is given in appendix 9. This outlines issues that are considered in more detail in the discussion with relation to programme theory.

### *Reflections Using the Personal Learning Contracts*

The first purpose identified before session 1 was *to help the pupils to understand that their thoughts rather than situations cause anxiety* (Stallard, 2002) (see appendix 7). However, in action, during the session it became clear through a discussion with a group of pupils that these thoughts may be very difficult to change for some pupils because they may have been repeatedly reinforced in many different situations, therefore two, hour long sessions were unlikely to be adequate to change this. The sessions had been set up to give the pupils strategies to deal with event specific anxiety related to the upcoming GCSE exams. The thoughts expressed by one of the pupils that she was ‘thick’ and that therefore there was no point in revising may or may not be leading her to experience anxiety, in addition, on the basis of this level of interaction it is hard to be certain the extent to which this might reflect a core belief (Beck et al.,1997) or perhaps be part of a general discourse shared by other pupils. However, it may have important implications for the engagement of the pupil in these sessions because of the personal meanings that she brings to them; we will discuss this in more detail in the following discussion. Another, related concern was the level of engagement of a group of three boys, one of whom was the pupil for whom the sessions had originally been set up. These pupils had listened and joined in constructively in the first part of the session. In the group work activity they engaged well with the task but completed it faster than the other groups and their subsequent interactions became increasingly boisterous. When

we came back together as a whole group, these boys found it difficult to re-focus. There are a number of possibilities why this might have happened, for example: their interpersonal dynamics, the group work had not been sufficiently challenging, losing concentration because it was near the end of the session, the discussion about negative automatic thoughts may have been personally challenging for some of them, etc. However, what is important here, as with the pupil who stated that she was 'thick', is the personal meanings and expectations that these pupils bring to the session and therefore how they interact and engage with it. The second session was only attended by six of the group (four of whom chose subsequently to take advantage of an extra revision session); interestingly none of these three boys attended at all, which may have been because of the issue of the changed timetable discussed above but equally may have been because the CBT sessions, for whatever reason, did not 'work' for them.

### *Evaluation Questionnaires*

At the end of the second session the two pupils attending were given evaluation questionnaires to fill in, they were requested to be honest in their evaluation, that their responses should be anonymous and that they would not be looked at until later. Although this data is extremely limited with such a small number of respondents the results are presented in table 2 below.

Question	1 (very)	2	3	4	5 (not at all)
Did you find the sessions helpful?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>			
How helpful do you think what you have learnt will be when you do your exams- do you think you will be more relaxed?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>			
How likely do you think you are to use any of the ideas or strategies?	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>			
(If yes to above) which ideas or strategies would you use?	Relaxation <b>X X</b>	Coping self talk <b>X X</b>	Changing your behaviour <b>X</b>	Increasing fun activities <b>X</b>	
Would you recommend these sessions to a friend?	Yes <b>X X</b>			No	

**Table 2: Pupils responses to the program evaluation questionnaire**

The table shows that the two pupils who completed the whole program perceived the sessions to be helpful and that they would be likely to use the strategies introduced. They both responded that they would make use of the relaxation strategies and coping self talk and that they would recommend the sessions to a friend.

From the evidence gathered through the implementation and evaluation of the programme it is problematic to give firm answers to the research questions, however based on the limited data the following outcomes are suggested.

In answer to the first question: is a group intervention based on CBT approaches perceived as helpful in dealing with exam related anxiety by the pupils participating? The evaluations of the two pupils who completed the programme give some positive support.

The second question: is a group intervention based on CBT approaches perceived by the adults delivering it to be helpful? The evaluations provided suggest that this question would be worth further exploration by a future study but cannot be firmly answered positively or negatively on the basis of the current study.

The third question: what is perceived to be the most useful aspect of the intervention? On the limited data from the pupil evaluations the relaxation and coping self talk appear to be perceived to be most useful by the pupils.

And finally in answer to the last question: what is the level of attendance? The attendance of only two out of the original group of nine in the second session is clearly very low and would suggest that the sessions were not appropriate for these pupils except for the fact that this needs to be considered in the context of an unforeseen timetable change and the fact that two pupils *did* attend and evaluated the sessions positively. However, I shall pick up this point among others in the following discussion.

## **Discussion**

The intention here, is to use this as an opportunity to not only discuss the evaluation of the CBT program and its implementation but also as a context to discuss some of the broader issues of evaluating projects carried out in the field by Educational Psychologists. To begin with I would like to return to Pawson and Tilley (1997) who propose that 'generative theory holds that there is a *real* connection between events which we understand to be connected causally' (p.33). They suggest that the basic idea is seen in the language used to make everyday causal references, 'in such cases we often speak of a 'case', 'system', 'thing', person' in *transformation*' (p.33). These transitions are often explained by external observable causes, so an example in the context of this study might be that the pupil remained calm and in control during the exams because s/he took part in the CBT program. However, Pawson and Tilley (1997) also suggest that 'we rely, as part of the explanation, on some *internal* feature of that which is changed' (p.33) therefore we might also point to the level of motivation to succeed of the individual taking part in the program. The problem with



randomized experimental evaluations, from their perspective, is their emphasis on that which can be observed and controlled and a tendency not to take account of the 'liabilities, powers, and potentialities of the program and subjects whose behaviour [*they seek*] to explain' (p.34). 'It is not programs which work, as such, but people co-operating and choosing to make them work' (p.36).

If we accept Pawson and Tilley's (1997) arguments, what is the implication of this for an evaluation of the current study? I would like to begin by considering the change of timetable and the resulting high attrition rate from the program. If we were considering this from the epistemological perspective of an experimental evaluation, this change in timetable would be regarded as a confounding variable which could be used to argue for the lack of success of the program. However, further to this, because experimental evaluations are goal-attainment, results models, they may offer statistical, outcome measures indicating a change even where there has been a high attrition from a study; only making reference to this in parenthesis. In the study by Flannery-Schroeder and Kendall (2000) it was observed that there was an attrition rate of 31% from the individual treatment condition and none from the group condition in their study; however, the authors fail to explore the possible reasons for this. The results model of evaluation is only interested in those participants that complete the programme and therefore provide results.

A realistic evaluation perspective would not be satisfied with these results led assessments, there would be a need to consider why some pupils stayed, even if only two, while others did not; why did some pupils co-operate and choose to make it work but not others? In other words what are the contexts and mechanisms operating to produce this outcome?

In answer to this question it is not possible to provide firm evidence; instead the aim here is to theorize about these choices. Why might a pupil choose to engage in a group program to help

with anxiety and stress leading up to their GCSE exams? Hansen (2005) suggests that the programme theory model can in effect be seen as extended results model in that it 'opens up the underlying black box of the programme theory, uncovers mechanisms and raises the focus to a cluster of interventions' (p.450). The aim of the model is to revise and further develop programme theory to learn 'what works for whom in which contexts' (p.450).

The answer to this really is that there are as many possible reasons as there are individuals, however, while accepting this truism there are likely to be some themes, for example: level of individual motivation, level of individual anxiety, individual aspiration etc. In a Realistic Evaluation approach these would be conceptualized as contexts, these 'are the settings within which programmes are placed or factors outside the control of programme designers' Timmins and Miller (2007). On the basis of the three examples offered here, it might be theorized that pupils who are very motivated to succeed in their GCSEs, who are aspiring to carry on studying, and who suffer high levels of anxiety leading up to exams would be motivated to take part in this type of program. So what about the pupils taking part in the current program?

First let us consider the two pupils who stayed for the second session. These were two female pupils who had worked well in the first session and had demonstrated a high level of engagement and motivation by taking time to thoughtfully complete and return the homework sheet for the second session. Both the pupils were on time for the second session, engaged well, and completed positive evaluations. So what might we theorize about these pupils and the reason for their engagement with the program. Perhaps these pupils are generally organized in their work and revision for their GCSEs (context) and therefore the change of timetable providing the opportunity of extra revision (mechanism) was not as important to them as it may have been to their peers who we might speculate were less organized (context).

Perhaps once they had arrived for the session and realized they were the only ones there they found it socially awkward to leave (context). In addition, if there are only two of you present, despite being anonymous, you may feel uncomfortable giving negative feedback whereas you may have done had there been the more impersonal dynamic of a larger group. But what about the pupils who did not attend?

In the evaluation above a pupil was discussed who described herself as being 'thick' (context). If we take her estimation of herself at face value and conclude that this is what she believes about herself what might this mean for her level of engagement in the program? The decision about who should be invited to take part in the program was left to the SENCo and through later discussion it appears that the majority of the group had been identified because they were low achievers. This seems to raise a question of relevance, in that the thoughts and subsequent feelings that these pupils may be having about their exams may involve a level of anxiety, but they could equally be leading to quite different feelings. If a pupil is a low achiever and has received messages about their ability which have reinforced this view of themselves over a long period of time leading to a core belief (Beck et al. 1979) that 'I am thick', it seems equally likely that they may feel a level of despondency (context) about the prospect of exams which two, hour long group sessions (mechanism) may be unlikely to change.

Finally in consideration of the pupil who the sessions were originally set up for, there a number of points that may be relevant for him. Firstly, as outlined at the beginning he had been previously offered support on two occasions but had not chosen to take it up, this had been hypothesized as being because it had been offered on an individual basis, however Sauter (2009) suggest that because of their developmental stage and their developing need for autonomy adolescents may find it difficult to acknowledge a need for help. The pupil did

attend the first session but he was one of the pupils who became increasingly boisterous towards the end and my observation was that he was central in this. However, it is possible that it was partly a reaction to the session content, because at this point we had begun to discuss negative automatic thoughts (Stallard, 2002) which may have felt threatening. Although many authors discuss the strengths of group sessions, Rossello et al. (2008) found that many of the adolescents in their study were reluctant to take part in group session especially if there were other pupils from their own high school in the group. Many adolescents may find the content of a session that discusses human vulnerabilities which have a personal resonance for them very difficult to manage in a group situation. To sum up this discussion a programme theory based on aspects of the literature and the hypotheses above is proposed. Timmins and Miller (2007) recognize that programme specification derived from the literature may not always be accurate depending on the quality of the literature. However, they suggest that the value of Realistic Evaluation is that ‘it encourages Programme Specification, whatever the state of the knowledge base’ (p.12).

#### *Programme Specification a Group CBT Intervention for Exam Anxiety*

A group CBT session to support Year 11 pupils to overcome exam anxiety that is designed to be delivered in school time in two, hour long sessions (C) is likely to succeed when:

- The programme is negotiated to take place in the term prior to the GCSE exams and the times of sessions and venues are fully negotiated with staff in school that have a level of decision making power that firmly secures this (M) leading to sessions taking place that are not disrupted, are sufficiently in advance of exams for pupils to put the strategies into place and achieve a high level of attendance (O).

- When the sessions are targeted at pupils who are motivated to succeed in their exams but have been observed to achieve lower scores in mock exams than anticipated which appears to be related to high anxiety leading up to or in the exam situation (M) these pupils will engage positively in the CBT sessions and use the strategies to manage their anxiety and achieve better results (O).
- When the ability composition of the group is conveyed to the programme leader sufficiently in advance of the sessions so that full account of this can be taken and materials etc adapted appropriately (M) then all pupils will be successful in engaging in the sessions (O).

### **Implications for Future Research and practice**

A future evaluation of the program discussed in this report would benefit from a number of changes in both implementation and approaches to data gathering. The time in the school year when this program was offered was not ideal because of its proximity to the pupils' exams; prior to the Easter break would be preferable. Further consideration needs to be given to how these sessions are offered to pupils to ensure that they are targeting the most appropriate group which in turn implies a consideration of who is most appropriate to refer for participation: school staff, parents or the pupils themselves. Fully negotiating the intervention and its evaluation earlier in the school year could allow the gathering of fuller data from different sources and might allow a longitudinal evaluation to be put in place. For example a comparison could be made between pupils, mock GCSE grades and/or teacher projections and their actual grades. In addition to the evaluation tools used to gather data during the sessions, teacher and parent evaluations could also be incorporated to add additional data points with the purpose of providing triangulation of data. Finally, if an exploratory study were to provide

promising results a larger project might be planned with a school or group of schools using, for example, the R.A.D.I.O model (Timmins et al, 2006) to negotiate and contract the project brief.

## **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to consider in respect of this report. Firstly, as a researcher and a Trainee Educational Psychologist, evaluating my own practice in the field, there are limitations that impact on the ease with which one is able to set up and run projects. These result from the requirement to meet the competing demands of rigor in order to make reasonable claims with the potential for replication, while at the same time needing to react to the capricious nature of working within schools, particularly large high schools with their complex organizational and internal dynamics. The design and evaluation of the CBT program reported in this paper experienced a particular ‘real world’ issue in its implementation: the change of timetable which it is suggested resulted in the very high attrition rate. The subsequent evaluation, particularly in respect of the pupil questionnaires, does not, therefore, provide compelling evidence to either support or question the value of the program. In addition, because the program resulted from involvement in casework its timing was not ideal. It would have been better if had taken place earlier in the year when the exam pressure on the pupils was not as great.

## **Conclusions**

The current study reported here has raised a number of issues for the planning, implementing and evaluation of programmes in the context of the work of Educational Psychologists working in schools. However, a consideration of the potential opportunity for devising

evaluations which take account of these complex settings offered by a 'Realistic Evaluation' approach appears to offer a potential way of generating data that can offer insightful understandings about how and when programmes are likely to have successful outcomes.

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## **Appendix 1: letter to pupil and parents**

Dear parent/ guardian and \_\_\_\_\_,

I would like to invite your son/ daughter to take part in a couple of sessions at X School this term called 'strategies for Success.' These sessions have been specially planned to support young people with the potential negative impact of nerves and feeling worried leading up to GCSE exams and to give them strategies to deal with this more effectively. The sessions will take place during the school day and will last one hour each; times have been arranged to avoid pupils missing essential GCSE classes. The sessions will be run by Andrew Byrne a Trainee Educational Psychologist with the support of Mrs Z, the school's SENCo.

In addition Mr Byrne would like to evaluate the impact of these sessions and use the information gathered to produce a report to support his University training. Your son / daughter will be informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw consent at any time and their anonymity in the final report will be assured. The evaluation will take the form of a simple, anonymous evaluation questionnaire to be filled in at the end of the last session and written reflections on the process by Mr Byrne. The information provided in the questionnaires will only be accessed by Mr Byrne and will be destroyed once the report has been written; written notes will be not refer to pupils by name or contain any recognisable descriptions. If your son/ daughter would like to take part in these sessions and you also give your consent please complete the reply slip below. In addition I need to request your consent for your son/ daughter's questionnaire to be used for the report. If you wish to discuss this further please do not hesitate to telephone me on XXXXXXXXXX.

Many Thanks

Andrew Byrne

Trainee Educational Psychologist

My son/daughter would/ would not like to take part in the 'Strategies for Success' sessions. I do / do not give my consent for my son/daughter \_\_\_\_\_ to take part.

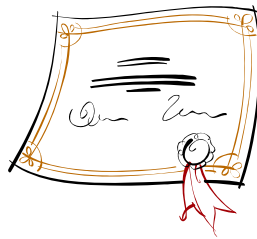
I do/ do not give permission for my son/daughter to take part in the evaluation questionnaire at the end of the 'strategies for success' session.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (parent/ guardian)

**Please return to Mrs Z (SENCo) at X School**

## Appendix 2: Strategies for Success Session 1 Power Point Slides

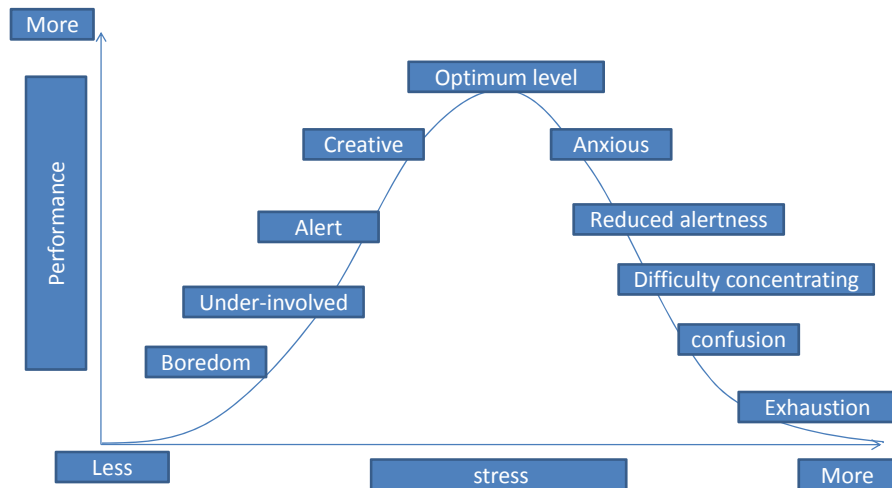
### *Strategies for Success*



## Anxiety and Exams

- **What is anxiety?**
  - Anxiety is a mood that can occur with or without an identifiable trigger or cause.
  - Another view is that anxiety is a mood state which helps you to prepare for a difficult situation which is coming up.
  - People often view exams as a difficult or negative situation which can then result in them feeling anxious.
- **Why anxiety can be useful?**
  - Anxiety is considered to be a normal reaction to stress. Some anxiety may help a person to deal with a difficult situation, for example at work or at school, by prompting you to cope with it
- **Everyone experiences anxiety at some time**

# The nature of stress



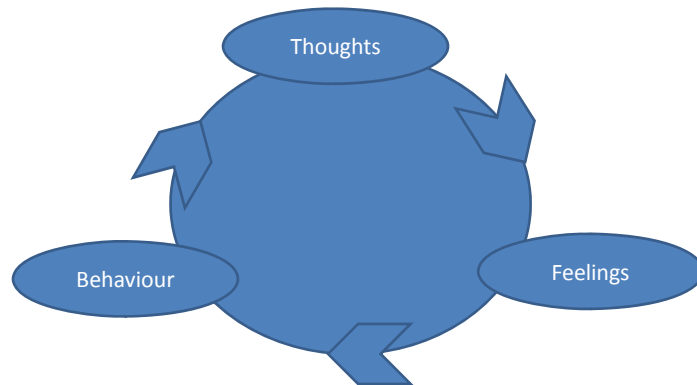
This diagram shows how stress and performance are related to each other – describe.

One way to reduce anxiety is to reduce your levels of stress. In groups of three can you think of something that might cause people to feel stress and what they could do to reduce it? – then we'll feedback to the whole group.

## Symptoms of Anxiety

- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Sweating
- An unrealistic view of problems
- Ongoing worry and tension

## Dealing with exam anxiety



You might have lots of different thoughts about exams:

- you might be having negative thoughts about them for example that they are not going to go well and that you will not get good marks or even fail.
- You might have positive thoughts about them: for example that you have worked hard and so they are going to go well.
- You may feel neither one way or another about the exams.

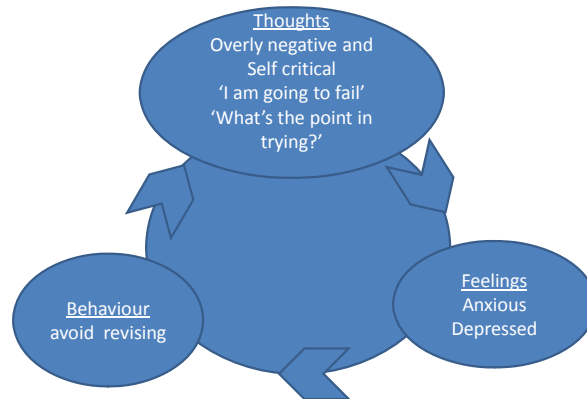
These thoughts will then effect the way you feel about the exams so:

- if you think you are going to fail you are likely to feel anxious or depressed
- if you think you are going to pass you are likely to feel relaxed and confident

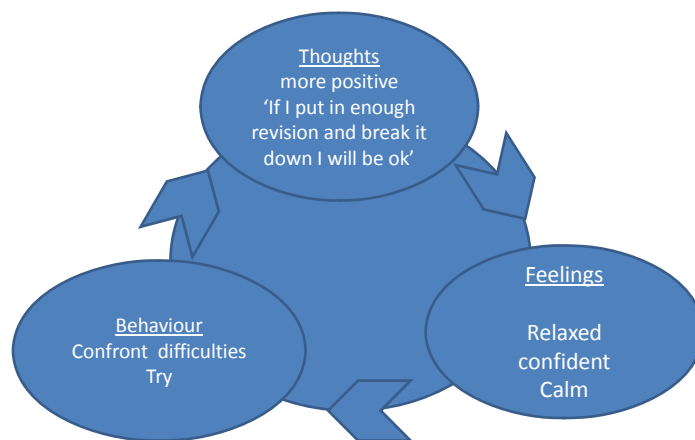
These feelings in turn effect how you are likely to behave leading up to the exams:

- if you feel anxious or depressed you may avoid revising because it leads you to worry even more
- if you feel relaxed or confident you may find that you have lots of energy to work hard and put in lots of effort.

## Negative cycle



## Positive cycle



This positive cycle suggests that by changing the way we think about things it is possible to change the way we feel and behave.

## Thoughts rather than situations are key to our feelings

Situation	Thought	Feeling
Revising for an exam	I will never remember all of this !	Anxiety
Sitting in the exam room	I am glad I put in all that extra revision in last week	Confidence
Waiting in the rain for a bus that is late!	These buses are never on time	Angry
Revising for an exam	I have got a lot to remember but if I break it down into chunks it will make it easier	Calm

So you can see that it is not really the situation of sitting an exam that may be causing you to feel worried or anxious but rather the way that you are thinking about them.

So how can knowing this help?

Well the theory is that if you can change the way you think about situations like exams it is possible to change the way you feel and behave and as a result be more successful.

Next we will compare negative and positive cycles of thinking, feeling and behaving.



## Activity

- You will be given cards with words and phrases on them to do with :
  - Feelings
  - Thoughts
  - Behaviours
- First divide the words into three piles: one for each type of word – feelings, thoughts, behaviours
- Next try to find thought, feeling and behaviour cards that could go together. Be ready to feed back and explain why.

## Automatic Thoughts

- These come from our *underlying beliefs* or *assumptions* and can be about you, your performance or the future:
- e.g. the assumption that 'I can only get a good mark if I study all day' might lead to the following automatic thoughts:
  - About yourself: '*I must be stupid*'
  - About your performance : '*I'm not working hard enough*'
  - About the future '*I'll never pass the exams and get to do the things I want*'
- It is when these automatic thoughts are negative that they can potentially become a problem to us
- In the next session we are going to talk about negative automatic thoughts in more detail and particularly think about how they might effect you when preparing for exams
- We will then talk about some strategies you can use to stop or challenge these thoughts so that they don't prevent you from doing your best.
- I am going to give you a simple homework exercise to do at the end of the session about automatic thoughts but before that another useful thing to do to combat stress is to learn relaxation techniques so we are going to do some muscle relaxing exercises – of course there are lots of other ways you might choose to relax and those all fine

## Muscular relaxation

- To start with, concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes. Breathe slowly and calmly.
- Then start the muscle exercises, working around the different muscle groups in your body.
- Hands
- Arms
- Face
- Chest
- Stomach
- Legs
- Then repeat the whole routine 3-4 times.

## Homework

1. Situation	2. Moods	3. Automatic Thoughts or Images
Practicing the piano – continually making the same mistake.	Frustrated miserable	About me: 'I'm useless'  About my performance: 'I'm never going to learn this piece properly'  About the future: 'I'm going to fail the piano exam'

Think about:

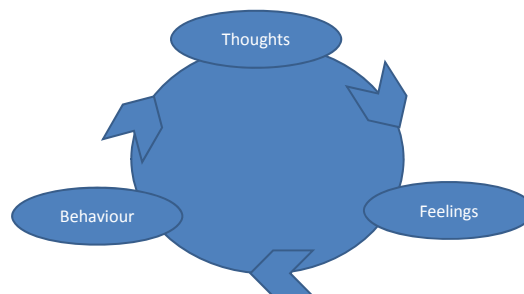
- What you thought about yourself
- What you thought about your performance
- What you thought about the future.

### Appendix 3: Strategies for Success Session 2 Power Point Slides

#### *Strategies for Success Session 2*



#### The link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour

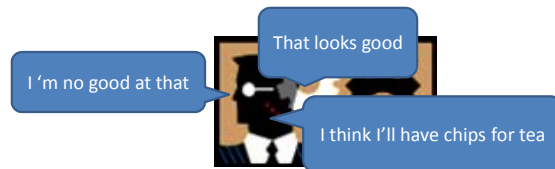


Last time we discussed the fact that the way you think about things affects the way that you feel about them and this then makes you behave in a certain way.

So – for example, you may be thinking ‘I’m no good at maths – I’m going to fail the maths exam’. This will probably make you feel either anxious or depressed or both, which will then make it more likely that you avoid revising for the exam and give up trying.

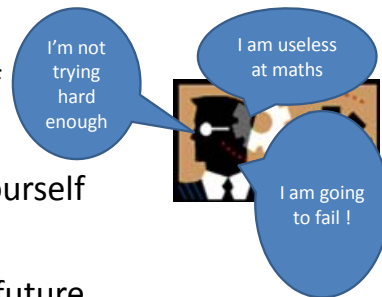
## Recap Automatic Thoughts

- These are the thoughts that pop into your head throughout the day – they provide a running commentary about what happens and what you do. We have these thoughts all the time, and they are important because they affect what we do and how we feel.



## Thoughts about you

- The thoughts we are interested in are those that are about **YOU**:
- how you see yourself
- the way you judge yourself
- the way you see the future



We spend a great deal of time listening to our thoughts, some of these thoughts are negative and about ourselves, what we do and what we expect to happen in the future. We accept many of these thoughts as true without really questioning them, particularly the negative ones which can lead to you feeling trapped by them.

## Homework

1. Situation	2. Moods	3. Automatic thoughts
????????????????	????????????????	-about you?  -how you judge yourself?  -The way you see the future?

## Controlling your thoughts

- **Coping self talk**

Eg - Instead of thinking 'I've only answered one question – I'll never finish' use **Coping self-talk** such as 'that's the first question finished –now for the next one'

Coping self talk can help you to recognize that although things may not be perfect, they may be better than you think.

Coping self talk is useful because it:

- can help you to feel more relaxed
- it can make you feel more confident
- it encourages you to try rather than to give up or avoid doing things

## Changing your behaviour

- When you have negative thoughts they may make you feel uncomfortable – to make yourself feel better you may:
- **Avoid** situations or doing things you find hard
- **Withdrawing** and staying at home
- **Stopping** doing the things that might make you feel unpleasant.

### What to do

- Start by increasing fun activities
- Break down tasks into small steps
- Face your fears

## Try it Out

- Identify a challenge
- Break it down into small steps
- Think about coping self-talk to keep you motivated
- Relax and imagine achieving your goal
- Choose a time when you will try it out
- Decide on your reward for success!

## Thankyou

- Evaluations – thank you for taking part in the sessions. I would be really grateful if you could fill out an evaluation form.

**Appendix 4: homework sheet**

The situation	Mood or feelings	Automatic thoughts or images

Automatic thoughts - think about:

- What you thought about yourself
- What you thought about your performance
- What you thought about the future.

## **Appendix 5: Description of the CBT Sessions**

### **Session Design**

The group work CBT intervention was planned to be delivered over two sessions, each to last one hour and spread over two weeks. The reason for this was a mixture of pragmatic considerations and minimum requirements for content delivery. Sessions of one hour were fixed upon to fit in with the length of the school's timetabled lessons and because the sessions were taking place during the school day, leading up to GCSE exams, it was important that they did not take up too much time out of the timetable. A minimum of two hour long sessions were required to comfortably cover the content and arranging the sessions so that they occurred two weeks apart allowed the opportunity to give the pupils a homework task to carry out between sessions.

The sessions were designed to be delivered with the support of two power point presentations (see appendices 2 and 3) using a mixture of didactic delivery, small group work and interactive discussion; the homework sheet was given at the end of the first session with the instruction to bring it to the second session so that it could be used as a focus of discussion (see appendix 4).

#### *Session 1*

The first session gave some basic background information about the nature of anxiety, its symptoms and its relation to stress. Models of the dysfunctional and functional cycles of thoughts, feeling and behavior were introduced (Stallard, 2000), the pupils were then given an activity to sort word cards into three piles: thought words, feeling words and behavior words. Next, they were asked to look at how different thoughts, feelings and behaviours might go together. Following on from this, automatic thoughts were introduced and an explanation about how these can impact on the way we feel and behave was given. The last part of the



session introduced deep breathing and muscular relaxation exercises based on those described by Stallard (2000, p.136).

A homework sheet based on one designed by Greenberger and Padesky (1995, p.52) was produced to give to the pupils at the end of the session with the instruction to identify at least one situation during the intervening weeks where they were aware of their automatic thoughts and to then record: the situation, how they felt and what the thoughts or images were (see appendix 4).

### *Session 2*

Session two revised the key concepts introduced in session one (see appendix 3). The link between thoughts, feelings and behavior were revisited followed by a recap on negative automatic thoughts and the way that these can lead to behaviours which are unhelpful. This was followed by examples that pupils provided using the homework sheet; they had been asked to identify automatic thoughts about themselves, the way they judged themselves and how they saw the future in relation to a specific situation. This was used to lead into the introduction of coping self talk as a way of controlling thoughts and changing behavior to break the cycle of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors. A worksheet was identified to give pupils an opportunity to develop a plan to put this learning into practice (Stallard, 2000; p.161).

## Appendix 6: Pupil evaluation sheets

### Strategies for Success Evaluations

1. Did you find the sessions helpful? (please circle a number)

Very      1      2      3      4      5      *Not at all*

2. How likely do you think you are to use any of the ideas or strategies discussed in the sessions? (please circle a number)

Very      1      2      3      4      5      *Not at all*

3. If you are likely to use the ideas or strategies, which would you use?  
(please circle a number)

*Relaxation*

*coping self talk*

*changing your behavior*

*Increasing fun activities*

4. How helpful do you think what you have learnt will be when you do your exams – do you think you will be more relaxed? (please circle a number)

Very      1      2      3      4      5      *Not at all*

5. Would you recommend these sessions to a friend? (Please circle)

*Yes*

*No*

## Appendix 7: PLC 1 Personal Learning Contract

Date: 21/4/10

Date of Review: 22/4/10

	Before	In Action	Difference	
Purpose	<p><b>What are my purposes?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-To help the pupils to understand that their thoughts rather than situations cause anxiety.</li> <li>-To help the pupils separate thoughts from feelings and behaviour.</li> <li>-To be able to communicate the concepts covered by the session in a way that the pupils can make sense of and relate to their own experience.</li> </ul>	<p><b>What actually was my purpose?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-My purpose was to help pupils understand that thoughts cause anxiety but I also realise that for some pupils those thoughts are not easily changed because they are underpinned by a history of habitual thinking and reinforcement by experience and messages they have received from others.</li> <li>- It was my purpose to separate thoughts/feelings/behaviour.</li> <li>-It was my purpose to communicate the session's concepts meaningfully.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Differences?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-The main difference was that I realised that it may be very difficult for some pupil's to change their thinking because the messages they have received and their experiences through their school careers have firmly fixed their assumptions about themselves.</li> </ul>	Purpose
Strategy	<p><b>What actions?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-giving a number of examples to exemplify meanings.</li> <li>-activity for pupils to separate words/phrases into thoughts/feelings/behaviours</li> <li>- Elicit pupil's own examples and provide concrete examples of my own.</li> </ul>	<p><b>What did I do?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-I gave examples but I think that it was difficult for some pupil's to make sense of because their thoughts have had a lot of reinforcement in the past.</li> <li>-The activity to separate thoughts/feelings/behaviour worked well.</li> <li>-I was able to both elicit and provide examples but did not do enough eliciting.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Differences?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-It is difficult for some pupils to see that it is in their power to change their thinking because their negative assumptions are so firmly fixed.</li> <li>-none</li> <li>-I need to try to elicit more of the pupil's own thoughts and examples.</li> </ul>	Strategy

Outcome	<b>How shall I judge my success?</b>  -Pupils will be able to recognise that it is possible to view situations in different ways that then dictate our feelings and behaviours.  -Pupil's will have been able to successfully put words into relevant piles and then use these to make connections  -Pupil's are engaged in the session and demonstrating a level of understanding through discussion.	<b>How well did I do?</b>  -Some of the pupils may have been able to accept this idea but for others, in the context of exams, ability and competence in school, there may be a history of negative messages that make this very difficult for them to accept.  -Pupils engaged positively in the task of identifying thoughts/feelings/behaviours.  -Pupils were generally engaged in the session. One group of boys appeared to engage less well towards the end which could be for a number of different reasons.	<b>Differences?</b>  -Pupils anxiety about exams may relate to thoughts that they feel are reasonable given that they are, from the pupil's perspective, grounded in experience and feedback from others.  -none.  -pupil's may not always appear to be engaging in the session. One hypothesis is that this is because of the content being personally challenging for some of them; it does not necessarily imply that they are not gaining from it. An indication of this may be the level of attendance of the pupils to the second session and their level of engagement with the homework task set.	Outcome	
	Review				
	<b>What are my strengths?</b> Session content well planned and generally positive engagement		<b>What are my weaknesses?</b> Some of the terminology in the power point may need simplifying		
	<b>What next? Plan next PLC</b>				

## Appendix 8: PLC 2 The Personal Learning Contract

Date ...4/5/10.... Date of Review...7/5/10

	Before	In Action	Difference	
<b>Purpose</b>	<p><b>What are my purposes?</b></p> <p>To re-cap on the key points from the first session, particularly the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour.</p> <p>To help the pupils recognise that they can take control by using coping self talk and changing their behaviour.</p> <p>Make sure content is accessible by using clear, simple language.</p> <p>Ensure full engagement in the sessions by eliciting more of pupil's thoughts and keeping group work content till nearer the end.</p>	<p><b>What actually was my purpose?</b></p> <p>The session recapped on the key points and the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour were covered.</p> <p>Discussed coping self talk and changing your behaviour can break your cycle of negative automatic thoughts and discussed what things you might do in relation to revision and exams.</p> <p>Unfortunately only two pupils attended the session, however this did allow lots of discussion and eliciting of pupils own thoughts.</p>	<p><b>Differences?</b></p> <p>There were no differences between my purposes before and in action; however because of the small attendance the session was run differently to how it would have had all pupils attended.</p>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Strategy</b>	<p><b>What actions?</b></p> <p>Power point slides recapping key points from previous week. Use simple language.</p> <p>Use homework sheets as a focus of discussion – stay as whole group for this but ask pupils to discuss in threes.</p> <p>Ask pupil's to think of their own examples to illustrate the concepts covered.</p>	<p><b>What did I do?</b></p> <p>The power point slides supported a discussion about the key points and the language was kept simple. The homework sheets were a really useful tool for discussion – because there were only two pupils we discussed them together. It was clear that the pupils had been able to use these effectively to support their learning and it allowed us to discuss the pupil's own examples.</p>	<p><b>Differences?</b></p> <p>The actions planned before and the actual actions were the same. These pupils had engaged in the homework task well.</p>	<b>Strategy</b>

Outcome	<b>How shall I judge my success?</b>  Good attendance at the session and homework done.  Pupil's able to demonstrate understanding by giving examples for concepts covered.  Pupil's able to follow new content.  Pupil's fully engaged till the end of the session.	<b>How well did I do?</b>  Attendance at the session was low because there had been a mix up in the timetable. Those pupils that did attend had done the homework and it had proved effective in developing their thinking.  The pupils demonstrated clear understanding of the concepts covered.  The pupils were engaged in the session and demonstrated their grasp of the content on the planning sheets used.	<b>Differences?</b>  Attendance was much lower than anticipated – this appeared to be because of a change of timetable.  The session was successful for the pupils that did attend.	Outcome	
	Review				
	What are my strengths?		What are my weaknesses?		
	What next? Plan next PLC				

### **Appendix 9: Contextual discussion about the group sessions**

A total of nine pupils returned permission slips indicating that they and their parents wished them to participate and all nine attended the first session; the group comprised of five boys and four girls all of whom were Year 11 pupils. The session was facilitated by the author supported by the school's SENCo; we began with introductions, explanation of the content of the programme and re-stating that participation in the sessions, activities and evaluation were voluntary. During the first half of the session the pupils sat in a semi-circle facing the facilitator and the power point presentation displayed on an interactive whiteboard. This half of the session comprised of didactic delivery of content and opportunities for discussion in small groups or pairs with feedback to the whole group. The pupils engaged well, both with the delivery of content and a discussion about experiences that caused them to feel stress or anxiety and the strategies they used to deal with this. Contributions fed back to the group about stressful experiences included: 'arguments at home', 'being late', and 'other people calling you names'. Strategies suggested for dealing with stress included: 'go for a walk with the dog', 'ignore them' (bullies), and 'listen to music'. Following this the pupils were asked to split into three groups, each one at a separate table. The groups were each given a pack of cards with feeling, thought and behaviour words on them with the instruction to sort them into three piles, one for each category. Once they had completed this task they were asked to select a word from each pile to construct a plausible link between a thought, the feeling it might produce and the subsequent likely behaviour, for example:

**Thought** – 'I'm good at this' **Feeling** – 'happy' **Behaviour** – 'continue to engage'

**OR**

**Thought** – 'It's difficult' **Feeling** – 'anxious' **Behaviour** – 'avoid'

While the pupils were split into groups the SENCo and facilitator moved between them to offer input and support if required. Two of the groups engaged well with this activity and requested and accepted support to distinguish what constituted thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The third group engaged well with the activity initially but completed the tasks quickly. While supporting one of the groups a discussion developed of a more general nature about expectations about exams and how the pupils felt about them. In the course of this one of the pupils stated that there was no point in her trying in her exams because she perceived herself to be 'thick'. This led to a re-appraisal of my purpose stated in the Personal Learning Contract which I will discuss in more detail later (see Appendix 8).

During the feedback activity all the groups were able to give well thought out links between thoughts, feelings and behaviours; however, the third group became quite boisterous during this feedback and when we subsequently reformed as a whole group in the semicircle to round off the session, they found it difficult to re-focus.

The second session began by initially discovering that the venue (the school library) had been double booked because there was an exam taking place; therefore, the session would have to take place in a vacant classroom. Only two pupils arrived on time for the start of the session. The SENCo, in the belief that the other pupils had forgotten about the session went to remind them to attend. Four more of the group eventually arrived, but it was clear from their facial expressions and body language that they were resistant to being there. Discussion with the SENCo revealed that there had been a change to the planned timetable subsequent to the sessions being set up and the pupils had now been allocated an extra personal revision session which they were missing; additionally, in discussion with the pupils it appeared that they had planned specific tasks in preparation for an exam later in the week. It was clear that they had been directed to attend the CBT session without their consent; I therefore reiterated the fact



that attendance at the sessions was voluntary and therefore they were perfectly at liberty to take advantage of the time to prepare for their exam if that was what they wished to do. As a result the four pupils who arrived later all chose to go back to their revision session and only the two pupils who had been present at the start remained. Such a small number of pupils required that the session was run differently from the original planned, but both these pupils wanted to take part and it was going to be unfeasible to reschedule the session for another date as it was now too close to the pupil's exams.

Both the pupils who remained had completed the homework task and the ideas that they had produced demonstrated that they had understood the content of the first session and had been able to apply it to a personal situation. Both the pupils engaged well in the session.