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RECRUITING AND RETAINING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES' SOCIAL WORKERS: THE POTENTIAL OF WORK DISCUSSION GROUPS

Current difficulties with the recruitment and retention of children and families' social workers have been formally acknowledged. However, although initiatives which focus on remuneration and career progression are clearly welcome, research and evidence from practice highlights how social workers themselves place high value on the availability of good quality supervision. Yet, questions remain about whether first-line managers have the time or are even in the best position to offer this support. This article draws on the experience and evaluation of one particular model of supervision — 'work discussion groups' — and explores its impact with residential social work staff and teachers as well as the potential for further developments of this kind.

Keywords supervision; work discussion groups; staff recruitment and retention; morale, stress and absence; professional development

Introduction

The government has acknowledged that there are serious shortcomings in the child welfare and child protection systems. There is also recognition that outcomes for looked after children will not improve unless they experience stable placements and good quality care (*Every Child Matters*, 2003). The key role that children and families' social workers must play in improving these services, and that this requires addressing current problems with the recruitment and the retention of experienced staff, has also been recognised (*Children's Workforce Strategy*, 2005).

The Children's Workforce Strategy consultation proposes improving recruitment and retention through remuneration and better employment conditions. However, these measures on their own are unlikely to address the acute morale problem that currently exists in social work, and especially amongst those who work with children and families. These professionals are involved in complex tasks and processes and so they clearly also require the right kind of support (Jones & Gallop, 2003).

A recent Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) report suggests that children and families' social workers value highly the availability of their line managers to offer advice

as well as opportunities to reflect on practice and professional judgement: what is generally called supervision. But it also claims that for a number of reasons many do not have regular access to this type of help, with serious consequences for sickness rates and staff turnover (*Making Every Child Matter — Messages From Inspections of Children's Social Services*, 2005).

Furthermore, while it seems clear that most social workers expect and want supervision, and that the quality of this support has a positive impact on job satisfaction (see Kadushin, 1992) there are questions about whether first-line managers are always well prepared, or even in the best position to take on this role (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; Jones & Gallop, 2003).

This article will argue that we need more thought and discussion about the most effective ways to support social workers in front-line services and, by looking at work that has been done with teachers and residential staff, it will suggest that we could learn from these experiences.

Support and supervision: the evidence from research and practice

Kadushin's overview of the role of supervision in social work makes reference to studies which not only suggest that social workers 'expect and want' supervision (Parsloe & Stevenson, 1978, in Kadushin, 1992, p. 510), but also that the quality of this support is '... positively correlated with job satisfaction and negatively correlated with anticipated turnover at levels of high statistical significance' (Slim, 1979, in Kadushin, 1992, p. 510). Furthermore, evidence from other studies is used to argue that as well as promoting job satisfaction and workforce stability, the provision of regular, supportive supervision is '... the most effective aid in combating burnout' (Munson, 1983, in Kadushin, 1992, p. 275).

Social work academics have consistently emphasised the importance of the availability of the right kind of supervision for staff development (see Brown & Bourne, 1996; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989) for encouraging good, reflective practice (see, for example Thompson, 2000) for ensuring that social workers are able to challenge oppression and promote the empowerment of service users through their intervention (Thompson, 2001) and even for improving staff retention (Jones & Gallop, 2003).

And, a recent CSCI report confirms that children and families' social workers see access to on-going support as extremely important, especially when they are involved in busy first contact services and have to make complex child protection decisions (*Making Every Child Matter — Messages From Inspections of Children's Social Services*, 2005).

However, this report also highlights how many of these workers are currently experiencing difficulties in relation to the availability, as well as the quality, of supervision. Local authorities who have been unable to recruit permanent social work staff have to rely upon short-term agency workers who may not be familiar with localities and communities and may not be committed to remaining in post for any length of time. This means that too often there is not an appropriate mix of less experienced and more experienced workers to provide support for the newly qualified team members. In the long-term this can create an unsettled culture in the work-place and contribute to low staff morale but, importantly, training and support issues also become more complex when there is high staff mobility, and it becomes difficult to establish on-going supervisory relationships (*Making Every Child Matter — Messages From Inspections of Children's Social Services*, 2005).

Furthermore, evidence from practice also suggests that, in these circumstances and with increased work load pressures, permanent staff are less willing to become practice teachers for students who require work placements as an essential part of their training. As a result, many courses now have difficulty in finding first contact placements for their students, meaning that too many newly qualified workers have finished their courses without direct experience of well-supervised case load management or good support. They then begin their working lives not knowing what to expect, or how to use supervision, which increases the risk of feeling overwhelmed, dangerous practice, 'burnout' and further staff turnover.

It is now widely accepted that there is an urgent need to address this situation by recruiting more permanent social workers and encouraging experienced staff to remain in front-line services. Yet, the responsibilities of supervision can present additional challenges, especially for middle and first-line managers (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997; Jones & Gallop, 2003). Hughes and Pengelly do recognise that '... supervision is the worker's most essential professional relationship' (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 2), but they draw upon their experience of running courses for staff supervisors in a range of disciplines to argue that most social work takes place in a 'turbulent environment', of constant change, and involves, '... managing the inevitable tension between needs and resources' (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 6).

First-line managers in this context have to 'look both ways', having responsibility for making decisions about the allocation of scarce resources, but doing so with 'painful' awareness of the impact on services users with great need (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 10). As supervisors they have to 'manage' by offering advice and taking responsibility for difficult decisions in complex situations. These responsibilities can be more onerous because first-line managers (often with relatively little experience) are under pressure to 'act as though they can do everything' (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 30).

Furthermore, 'effective supervision' should also have a 'professional aspect', promoting good practice by taking a 'proactive' stance and looking at broader issues, family dynamics and, importantly, exploring the worker's feelings and how these might influence and shape any intervention (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 26). This is clearly not an easy task and it should not be surprising that, as these authors claim, '... most studies of supervision in the last decade speak critically of a mechanistic, procedurally controlled "check list" type of supervision, with little or no space for exploration of the work or the workers' feelings about it' (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 28). In very busy offices with little time available '...supervision becomes mainly concerned with a narrow version of performance management, focusing on ensuring that procedures have been followed and that social workers are practising within agency expectations' (Jones & Gallop, 2003, p. 103). And, as so few first-line managers are prepared or trained for this role, its potential 'ambivalence' is rarely acknowledged (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997, p. 29).

Woodhouse and Pengelly's (1991) study of children and families' social workers highlights how the situation is even more complex for professionals who are routinely involved in passing judgement and making child protection decisions which sometimes involve removing children from their parents. This understandably creates 'maximum anxiety' for the social workers, and 'maximum tension' between them and other professionals who might be involved with the family (Woodhouse & Pengelly, 1991,

p. 176). The impact on individual workers can be to undermine self-esteem, and to create self-doubt and fear, especially of making the situation worse.

In addition, this work can provoke mixed feelings about birth families, particularly when children have experienced abuse or parents refuse offers of help, but for many social workers, '... it could not be permissible and normal ... to have bad as well as good feelings. Bad feelings had to be discounted as "just instinctive" if their professional self-esteem was to be sustained' (Woodhouse & Pengelly, 1991, p. 180).

In these situations access to good supervision is essential so that any ambiguity and conflict can be acknowledged, and workers are able to make decisions which are in the best interests of children. Unfortunately though, the evidence from this study suggests that too often social workers do not receive this support and as a result they can develop a 'citadel' response, becoming defensive, sticking to procedures and sheltering behind 'the department' (Woodhouse & Pengelly, 1991, pp. 185–186). This is particularly worrying at a time when the government wants to establish multi-disciplinary teams and is encouraging professionals to work together across disciplines. And, as Jones and Gallop argue, it does suggest that we need to think more about the current approach to supervising and supporting social workers (Jones & Gallop, 2003).

The work discussion group model

One particular model of supervision that has been developed over the past 50 years at the Tavistock Clinic is the model of 'work discussion groups'. Initially developed for use within clinical trainings (such as child and adolescent psychotherapy), this model of supervision, learning and teaching is gradually being 'exported' to other service and community based settings (Canham, 2000). However, despite the fact that organisations like the Tavistock Clinic and Brent Centre for Young People are increasingly providing work discussion groups within Health, Education and Social Services, and despite the fact that work discussion groups have recently been cited as a 'model of good practice' (DfES/DoH, 2006), there is still a worrying lack of sufficient provision across these settings and a corresponding paucity of papers published on their use, impact and value within professional journals (Jackson, 2002, p. 130; 2005).

'Work discussion groups' provide a forum in which staff are offered a unique and essential opportunity to share any concerns, difficulties or challenging issues preoccupying them in their work with clients: particularly those at risk. These issues are then discussed together as a group, usually facilitated by an external consultant with relevant professional training and experience (such as a child and adolescent psychotherapist or clinical psychologist), rather like a group consultation. Primarily, work discussion groups focus their attention on the development of reflective practice rather than being driven exclusively by management demands, decision making or specific solutions.

The rationale for this different approach is that too often professionals can be propelled into *reactive rather than reflective practice* without sufficient understanding of what is really going on — *what the actual (rather than perceived) problem is*. For example, staff will often focus on the surface level of what is said or done, rather than thinking more carefully about what else might be being unconsciously communicated, how it is being communicated, the impact on the worker and others around the client and, given

all of this, what is likely to be the most helpful and effective response at any given point in time. In this respect, while solutions are not the primary task of work discussion groups, feedback from participants indicates that by taking this approach, they do result in more effective responses with decisions and solutions being arrived at *as a secondary gain* once a deeper understanding has been achieved through the group discussion.

This article will draw upon examples of the work discussion group model in action from education and social care settings. In particular, it will use the experience at Brent Centre for Young People and the Tavistock Clinic of developing mental health outreach projects within secondary schools. While these projects offer therapeutic resources directly to pupils, the central focus has been, wherever possible, the provision of consultation and work discussion groups to staff. Over the past eight years work discussion groups have been offered by the author to over 120 teaching staff within 10 secondary schools (including teaching and pastoral staff, middle managers and senior leaders).

In addition, the article also draws upon the experience of running a work discussion group for 15 residential social workers within a local authority children's home for adolescents over a two year period. Evaluation and outcomes from both settings will be used to describe the impact and benefits of this type of support, and to suggest that it has the potential to be used with other social care professionals.

The aims of work discussion groups

Although any work-related issues can be brought for discussion, the primary aims of work discussion groups are to enable staff to develop a deeper understanding about:

- underlying meanings of client behaviour and communication (including non-verbal communication);
- psychological factors that impact on learning, teaching, working with and caring for troubled and challenging clients;
- the ways in which clients can impact on staff at an emotional level and how this in turn can impact on the way staff engage and work with their clients;
- the ways in which particular client population groups can impact on wider staff and organisational culture — and vice versa (for example, experience suggests that, staff working in primary schools tend to behave in quite a different way to those working in secondary schools who can, in turn, behave in quite a different way to those working with adults); and
- ways in which adverse past experiences can hinder the development of future good experiences and relationships.

Group membership and frequency of meetings

Work discussion groups are suitable for any staff within the organisation who are interested, willing and able to attend. Membership, ideally, should be voluntary as those feeling 'instructed' to attend by managers are more likely to resist the process and to perceive the instruction as being to do with implicit criticism or concerns about performance. This is the antithesis of the intended ethos of work discussion groups, which is one of partnership

between members, the facilitator and the employing organisation with the shared aim of enabling staff to extend their thinking, learning and skills within a *safe and supportive framework*.

However, although membership should be voluntary, members would be encouraged to commit to attending sessions on a regular basis, whenever possible, so that the group is able to build up a sense of cohesion, familiarity and trust amongst members.

For similar reasons, work discussion groups are best offered in a reasonably regular way, at least for an initial period, so that some continuity of discussion and ideas can develop and take root. Most commonly work discussion groups are offered on anything from a weekly to monthly basis although in some circumstances groups can function effectively on a less regular basis, such as every 6–12 weeks.

Group structure

Membership of work discussion groups can vary widely between organisations but works most effectively with anything from four to 12 members. Groups can be facilitated effectively in a number of different ways. In most cases, however, while the ‘facilitator’ or ‘consultant’ helps to shape the content of the discussion, it is most important in the first instance to try to draw on the as yet unrealised observations, expertise and potential within group members.

In some settings, it is usually agreed, in advance, that one (or sometimes two) members will bring or ‘present’ an issue or concern preoccupying them. Usually, this will be in the form of a written up account of an interaction or situation involving the worker and client/s. However, workers often feel apprehensive about putting their thoughts down on paper so prefer to just ‘talk to’ the issue within the group having perhaps thought about it beforehand. Sometimes, a ‘wait and see’ policy can be agreed in which case the group will see who has what on their mind on the day and will decide on the basis of that what or who the focus should be.

It should be emphasised that in the context of work discussion groups, ‘presentation’ does not mean anything formal, polished or perfect. Nor does it require any high-tech media equipment or power point slide-shows. In fact, this would really be antithetical to the aims of the group which would be to help workers with some of the more ordinary, messy, complicated, confused and confusing aspects of their work and client relationships. Presenters are therefore simply encouraged to bring a real issue, interaction or experience — ideally *currently* preoccupying them (so that it feels relevant) — and to share enough about it to encourage the group to begin discussion and thinking.

The impact of work discussion groups: examples from practice

1. The importance of observing feelings and reactions

Presenters are encouraged to record as much detail as they are able to remember about an interaction with a client or group of clients. They are asked to include not only background history and what was said or done by whom, but also more subtle observations about the wider context, the emotional atmosphere and how the interaction impacted on the worker internally; the thoughts or feelings they noticed themselves having, even if they seemed, at first, to be irrelevant.

For example, a conversation with a client who was describing traumatic and/or disturbing experiences might evoke in the worker a wide range of *apparently* contradictory feelings. The worker might feel tremendously sad and even tearful, furious and enraged, or completely unmoved and detached from the client and their experience. Similarly, while professionals might not feel comfortable in acknowledging it, there are some clients who they don't like or even hate, feel especially concerned about or potentially neglectful towards. They might even feel that they have to avoid discussion of sensitive topics with some of their clients. It is very important to share these feelings and reactions (as far as possible) as an intrinsic part of the relevant information needed for the discussion. Above all, workers need to take responsibility for their own thoughts and feelings and how these might be related to their personality, background and sometimes prejudices. But even after taking account of this, these different reactions to work often also provide crucial (though incredibly subtle) information about how clients have (or have not) processed their own experiences.

For example, in one work discussion group involving education professionals, a teacher¹ shared with group members how he felt really repulsed by a particular pupil — a 13-year-old boy. Almost grimacing as he spoke, he told how he (the pupil) was fat, he smelled bad, he was spotty and he was not endearing to anyone around him. This teacher shamefully admitted that he was always relieved to see the back of him. While feeling initially embarrassed about the way that he felt towards this pupil and anxious about what his colleagues might think, the process of putting it into words and then thinking it through with the group led to some important insights into what might have been going on for this boy. After the initial anxious hilarity and tension-relieving giggles from other group members, for whom the description seemed to resonate, this led onto a much more thoughtful discussion about what it can be like for children who are in the throes of puberty and entering adolescence; frequently feeling acutely self-conscious about themselves, their bodies and fearful of the reaction of their peers. Important links were made between this and the parallel experience of the teacher having to share this embarrassing issue with his own peers.

The group continued to consider the nature of this boy's relationships with his primary carers both in external reality (how they actually felt and behaved towards him) as well as internally in his mind (in terms of how he perceived them). As the discussion progressed, the group began to think more about how the boy might also feel himself to be repulsive and how he might then unconsciously invite others to behave in a way that confirmed his worst fears and beliefs about himself. The group could then begin to think about the ways in which workers need to be aware of how we can be powerfully drawn into taking up roles which fit with the internal world and relationships of the client rather than being to do with who we actually are and how we actually feel.

By this stage, all members of the group were actively engaged and interested in the discussion and full of thoughts about how they too can be pulled into all sorts of complicated situations with some of their own pupils. As well as feeling relieved to share and be helped to think about his particular difficulties with this particular pupil, the teacher who presented spoke of what a relief it was to discover that others had similar feelings and reactions. He also said that he now felt much less inhibited and paralysed by his feelings and more able to understand where this boy was coming from. As a result, he said that he now felt much more able and interested to help and work with this pupil.

At this point in the meeting, another teacher then felt able to volunteer a similar difficulty she was having with an 11-year-old girl. The teacher described how this girl behaved perfectly for most of the time but then suddenly, in the last five minutes of the lesson began to become disruptive and would then refuse to leave at the end of the class. As a result, this teacher was repeatedly forced into literally throwing her out in a way that did not feel normal or appropriate and which made her feel quite uncomfortable. Following the previous discussion, group members were soon helped to tune into the significance of this girl's early experiences of abandonment and rejection by her birth parents followed by several break-downs in foster placements before she was finally adopted at the age of five.

Rather than feeling infuriated, frustrated and guilty about the girl's behaviour and their own reactions, the teacher (and other group members) became interested in how this girl almost compulsively seemed to be repeating past experiences of rejection as if to confirm her worst fears that this was her worth and destiny. At the same time, this deeper understanding of what might be going on under the surface helped the group think about how the girl's behaviour might also be her only way (albeit counter-productive) of communicating her desperation to feel wanted, secure and safe. While still having to manage the realities of such behaviour, group members then began to think about how one might subtly, but importantly, modify the way in which one deals with it.

This work discussion group session ended on a positive note, looking at what members felt they had learned from the discussion. Comments were also made about how, when professionals are not helped to think about feelings and reactions and to respect their importance within a supported context, they come to believe they should be ignored as an interference and diversion from a more 'neutral' and 'professional' approach to clients. As such, they are certainly not shared with colleagues for fear of being judged.

The group also identified related issues they were now eager to discuss in future meetings. Of particular significance and central to life in a secondary school was the whole area of adolescence and adolescent development — something that almost all teachers, without exception, complain they have received absolutely *no training in whatsoever*² (Salavou, Jackson & Oddy, 2002).

2. *Managing the intensity of the client–worker relationship*

Paradoxically, while being full of hostile feelings towards one's clients is unpleasant, the sense of isolation in workers can be especially acute when they feel their client is too attached to them or — even worse — when they fear they have become too attached to their client. For rather than consider intense feelings (whether positive or negative) as an *ordinary and inevitable* part of the work (particularly when vulnerable clients or young and newly qualified workers are concerned), workers tend to believe there is something 'wrong', 'bad' or 'taboo' about it. Then, fearing the criticism and adverse judgement of their colleagues, concerns are less likely to be shared and more likely to be avoided. Sadly, this then does increase the probability of the client–worker relationship being mismanaged with greater future problems for all involved.

One powerful example of this comes from a different work discussion group, this time offered to residential social workers within a children's home.

In the group session, an experienced residential social worker decided to share her concerns about a 14-year-old boy with whom she had been working closely. She described his disruptive family history and noted the acrimonious relationship between his parents,

which led to the family break-down and prevented any joint parenting or support from taking place once the boy had been taken into care. She felt he was a needy boy and so had been seeing him for individual key work sessions on a weekly basis for several months. Overall, she felt he had been able to use his time with her well and that they had an excellent working relationship. Recently though, she had become increasingly concerned and anxious about his state of mind, his level of despair and also about whether he might be feeling suicidal. Since she was afraid of 'making things worse' by talking to him about her concerns in case she 'put thoughts into his head', she decided instead to refer him to the local Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service for a psychiatric assessment.

In the work discussion group, the worker presented her problem as needing some advice about how best to help this rather worrying boy. Indeed, this was extremely important to consider given his state of mind and possible suicidal ideation. However, as the group were helped to unpack the situation, what soon emerged was how the boy had completely cut off contact with his worker since being referred to the psychiatrist. He had not turned up to any of their meetings for some weeks and had even 'blanked' her once in the corridor when she had tried to speak with him; turning away and talking instead to some other girls. The worker admitted that she was feeling hurt and rejected by this boy although she felt that, as the 'adult', she 'oughtn't' to feel this way. Also, she could not understand why his attitude to her had changed so suddenly, but felt she shouldn't talk to him about it in case it exposed her as being too vulnerable, as if she were the one who needed to meet with him rather than vice-versa.

As well as having cathartic value for the worker, sharing her upset about the situation enabled the group to begin to consider how this boy might have felt — not only about his home situation but more immediately about his relationship with his valued key worker to whom he was evidently very attached. How, for instance, had he experienced his key worker referring him to someone else? Did he experience it as a sign of her care and concern (as she had conceived and intended it) or quite the opposite and more like a rejection? The group became interested in the process by which the boy had managed to transfer his own feelings of rejection into his worker and how she then was left with them to deal with and make sense of. Linked to this, the worker admitted to the group how anxious she felt about being out of her depth in this work. This again was explored not only in relation to what actual support she (and he) needed but also in terms of the boy's fear of being overwhelmed by his problems — an experience which he then might have been communicating to his worker by making her feel the same way.

At a more general level, this discussion resulted in increased awareness in the worker and other group members about quite how attached their clients can *ordinarily* become and how they therefore needed to be extra sensitive around times of change or separation. This led the worker to think about how next time she would try to *work with her client* towards a referral and how this process would include more preparation with their client including discussion about how the client felt about it. Group members emphasised the wider significance of this different approach in terms of how many of their clients felt that they had been the passive casualty of change on numerous occasions with no one seeming interested in how it impacted on them or how they felt about it.

As the group session came to an end one worker sighed deeply and then announced to the group that she would be leaving as she had been offered another job. The worker admitted that she had been too anxious to let the staff know, never mind the clients!

This prompted a rush of other related and important questions needing further discussion. For example, when and how might one raise the fact that one is leaving to one's clients? Should one plan it in advance or would it be better to leave quietly without making a fuss? What should or shouldn't one say? What is or is not helpful to disclose about the reasons for leaving? How is this experienced by the client?

Although there wasn't time to discuss these in any detail at this point, the group valued the opportunity to do so in the following meeting when there was a thoughtful discussion about the whole issue of endings (both temporary and final). The need for such a discussion was evident as most members were full of vivid examples about how tense the atmosphere in the children's home is on Friday afternoons and Monday mornings as well as around other staff absences (e.g. holidays or sickness) when clients are separated from their key workers for longer than usual. As this was considered, workers also began to acknowledge how what might be considered a welcome 'break' for some might, in contrast, be experienced as something 'broken' by another. For instance, there was increased recognition about how, especially for those children who come from more troubled and disrupted backgrounds, the children's home is felt to be the one place where they rely on some kind of coherent structure and boundaries as well as consistency and reliability from their carers. Far from being relaxing then, the 'break' tends to be a time when anxieties run high as the staff and client group go away and are felt to be unavailable (see also Saltzberger-Wittenberg *et al.*, 1983).

The impact of work discussion groups: evaluation

The experience of running work discussion groups does suggest that they can have a far reaching impact by operating on a number of different levels. For example, not only do they offer the opportunity for one worker to develop their relationship with one client, but for all workers to extend their thinking in a way that enhances their relationships with all of their clients. Moreover, since work discussion groups involve several practitioners working together over time, the capacity for peer consultation between colleagues develops not only within the group but also outside of the work discussion groups too, and this can have an impact on the wider culture of the organisation.

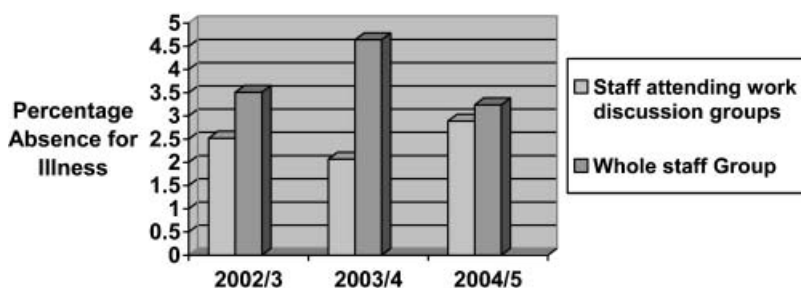
Evidence from Brent Centre for Young People and Tavistock Centre outreach projects into secondary schools also indicates that when offered in a regular and sustained way over time and when properly supported by senior managers, work discussion groups can also help staff to:

- develop professional skills, confidence and job satisfaction;
- deepen understanding of clients and the impact clients have on workers;
- develop the capacity to manage disturbing relationships that clients sometimes build with workers;
- reduce work-related staff stress, insecurity and absence; and
- promote the development of reflective practice within the wider culture of the organisation.

In addition to direct verbal feedback shared within the work discussion groups themselves, qualitative and quantitative data collected from over 90 evaluation forms

(which are administered on an approximately annual basis and completed anonymously by teachers within the groups), confirmed that:

- 93% of staff found the work discussion groups *supportive*.³
- 88% of staff reported that they found it *helpful to share their work* with colleagues and an outside professional.⁴
- 92% of staff reported that they had developed a *deeper understanding* about the meaning of behaviour.⁵
- 97% of staff reported that they had been *helped to persevere* with challenging pupils when they had previously felt like giving up.⁶
- 83% of staff reported that they felt *less stressed* after talking about pupils/clients with whom they had been struggling.⁷
- Significantly, in one particular school in which a culture of work discussion groups had permeated the organisation over the course seven years it was shown that the staff attending the three parallel work discussion groups also had a *significantly lower rate of absence* than the staff group as a whole over a three year period.⁸ This is illustrated in the graph below.



Qualitative material from staff about their experience of work discussion groups support and qualify this quantitative data. Above all, workers comment on what a 'relief' it is to discover that they 'are not alone' in struggling with a particular difficulty, issue or dilemma. Many workers comment on how 'good it is to get things off their chest' and how 'differently this makes them feel afterwards'. As such, workers have reported that they 'now feel more confident' (about their work) having felt 'completely out of their depth before'. For some, this has meant that 'instead of hating or resenting a client they feel like they want to try and help them again'.

Overall, workers report that work discussion groups enable them to become 'much more aware' about their clients and 'much more positive about their work'. In some cases, where workers have been faced with especially upsetting or disturbing situations (for instance in cases where young people are suicidal and/or self-harming, or when allegations have been made against staff members), workers have reported that the work discussion groups have 'literally saved them' and 'kept them sane' when they felt like 'giving up' and even leaving the profession. As a result, many report that the work

discussion groups have offered them some of the 'most useful training' they have received in their careers. This sentiment was also echoed by the headteacher, Andrea Berkeley, who reported that the work has had a 'big impact on achievement (pupil) as well as on staff morale. ... It has made people more tolerant, not of bad behaviour, but of the pupils themselves.' (quoted in the *Times Educational Supplement*, 1 March 2002).

Improving support for social workers: the potential of work discussion groups

Although, as the previous section illustrated, work discussion groups have been used successfully in residential settings, they have not been widely available for social workers or their managers in front-line services. Yet, they clearly do have the potential to provide additional support, especially for children and families' social workers.

These professionals are dealing with very complex situations and are working with adults and children with high levels of need. But, as this article has argued, many currently do not receive the right kind of supervision to help them to manage their relationships with their clients, or their feelings about their work. As a result, social workers, like teachers, can begin to feel insecure about their practice and experience a sense of isolation, leaving them less able to help themselves, their colleagues or the families they engage with. There is then inevitably an impact on job satisfaction, staff morale and the workplace culture, and this clearly contributes to high staff turnover and problems with recruitment (Jones & Gallop, 2003). Equally worrying is a lack of training or preparation for first-line managers who are expected to take on the role of supervisor, and who may struggle with this responsibility as well as with their own feelings about the work they do (Woodhouse & Pengelly, 1991).

The evidence presented here does suggest that work discussion groups, facilitated by a professional who is not involved in the day-to-day case-load management, could focus on relationships and provide the space that is needed to reflect on processes and the feelings that this work inevitably evokes. In addition, the opportunity to meet with peers would provide an additional source of support for social workers who rarely find the space or have a forum where they feel safe enough to share their experiences.

At a time of 'crisis' in social work recruitment and retention (Jones & Gallop, 2003) any such initiatives which could help these workers to feel more supported should be welcomed. Social workers who have access to work discussion groups are more likely to be good at what they do, but also to feel more positive about themselves and their role. This is clearly essential as social workers become members of multi-disciplinary teams, and are expected to work in partnership with other professionals. And most importantly, the long-term benefits to children and families of creating a confident and happy workforce is well worth any short-term investment, and is long overdue.

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Notes

- 1 In this article 'teacher' is used, for simplicity, as a generic term for any staff working within a school.
- 2 For example, in a recent mental health and staff training needs assessment carried out by the Brent Centre for Young People in 10 secondary schools, only 12 out of 145 teachers (6.9%) reported that they had 'received sufficient training in adolescent development' (Salavou *et al.*, 2002).
- 3 These questions used a 6 point scale from -3 to +3. For example: "How supportive have you found the group?" where -3 indicated 'very unsupportive' while +3 indicated 'very supportive'. For the purposes of this paper the author understood scores of +2 or +3 to indicate that participants found the group supportive.
- 4 Same as point 3 above
- 5 These questions used a 4 point scale from 0–3. For example: 'To what extent has participation in the work discussion group helped you develop a deeper understanding about the meaning of behaviour?' A score of '0' indicated 'not at all' while a score of '3' indicated 'very much'. For the purposes of this paper, the author understood scores of 2 or 3 in this case to indicate that participants were helped to develop a deeper understanding about the meaning of behaviour.
- 6 Same as point 5 above
- 7 same as point 5 above
- 8 Although it cannot be said from this data that attendance at the work discussion group was, in itself, the cause of the reduced rates of absence, the school concerned found this compelling data and believed there to be a direct link. This data also concurred with other observations made by senior members of staff about the noticeable broader personal and professional development of staff attending the groups.

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