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ABSTRACT

This research explored the implications for a teacher in undertaking small-group work in the classroom. The two resources used were "The Practice of Group Work" by William Schwartz and "Group Work in Secondary Schools", and the "Training of Teachers in Its Methods" by Barrington Kaye and Irving Rogers. The first resource was concerned with methodological principles for social work in general and group work in particular. The second resource contained an empirical account of the practical issues involved in the secondary classroom group experience. Both resources were used in an investigation of the phases of group work, specification of the work, self-selection of groups, the teacher's role, and the group experience in teaching English. Both resources agreed on the following conclusions: a) the teacher and/or worker must be sensitive to group needs, b) the group must have a self-directed, common goal, and c) the group must be self-selected. Contrasting views of these resources involved the role of feelings and responsibilities for the teacher and/or worker in the group experience. (BRB)

THE GROUP EXPERIENCE IN SCHOOLS
(A preliminary view for English teachers)

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This paper sets out to explore the implications for a teacher of his undertaking to use group work in his classroom. By a "group" here is meant between 4 and 8 students, the teacher not included, and by "the group experience" is meant their experience in determining, organizing, and carrying out work on their own collaborative initiative. This not unfamiliar concept has yet to find a firm footing in practice in Canadian secondary schools, and I am particularly concerned with the feasibility of achieving acceptance among secondary school teachers in Canada for the striking change in role that is called for, if this kind of practice is to become part of their professional repertoire.

The two resources I shall use have different origins in field despite a striking unanimity of thought: the first, by William Schwartz, is from social work experience, and is an article from the book he edits with Serapio Zalba called The Practice of Group Work. Entitled "On the Use of Groups in Social Work Practice," it leads off the selection of readings with a formulation of methodological principles for social work in general, and group work in particular, that translates with peculiar force into educational terms, being couched in lucid language though theoretical in orientation. My other resource comes from teacher education in England, a book entitled Group Work in Secondary Schools, and the training of teachers in its methods by Barrington Kaye and Irving Rogers. It deserves to be widely known, for it is a comprehensive and also lucid empirical account of the practical issues not only of this sort of work in school but also, from the authors' experience, of a program of training student teachers at Redland College in Bristol.

The different purposes and different backgrounds of these two texts both give their unanimity greater weight and at the same time afford some purchase, by virtue of certain differences in emphasis, on the point of concern I have mentioned, namely, the feasibility of gaining sufficient acceptance for the change of role on the part of teachers. Changes of role by teachers involve changes in role expectation on the part of those who watch them closely - parents and administrators as well as children: and a change of role also involves a change of attitude for the teacher himself, which may constitute a challenge to the very personality structure that influenced his choice of career in the first place. Both texts are emphatic about the change in locus of authority in group work and its surprising effects on the teacher or social worker accustomed to exercising authority: where they differ somewhat is in defining the nature of the new role. The discreetly helpful questions and suggestions of the teacher to his groups, in Kay and Rogers' account, are to be supplied chiefly from the realm familiar to the teacher of the knowledge

and skills required to complete the designated task; Schwartz's worker is emphatically advised to deal with feelings and the support of emotions in addition, so as to resolve any obstructions to collaboration between the members of the group.

It would be natural to object that these differences in emphasis are only appropriate to the work in hand in each case. Teachers deal primarily with knowledge and skills, social workers with inter-personal feelings and emotion: it is not as if Kaye and Rogers did not make plain the importance of emotional commitment as a great motivator and desirable result of the group work method; nor as if Schwartz ignores knowledge and skills in the work at hand. What I fear, as one particularly concerned with the teaching of English, is that the ease with which, in England, Kaye and Rogers may assume that their placing knowledge and skills in the forefront of their discussion will be balanced in practice by a certain humanity in the cultural climate, is not translatable to North America where that kind of balance seems more often in peril. I would feel more secure about that essential change of role taking place if these texts had been unanimous on this point also, and if Kaye and Rogers had made it less possible for teachers in England and in Canada to mistake the priority they should give, in adopting group work procedures, to attending to the matters of feeling and emotion in those groups.

Phases in group work: "tuning-in"

Let me proceed to follow in outline the critical steps, as both sources see them, that a teacher must follow if this kind of work is to be successful. From my observation of current practice in schools, incidental to the duties of a supervisor of practice-teaching, and from my own experience in attempting this kind of process in classes of student teachers, it is my impression that many willing attempts by teachers to get into group work come to grief because so little is known about the variety or intensity of the difficulties involved, and consequently about the expertise required and the proper focus of one's attention and effort. It should be emphasised, therefore, that the following is indeed an outline of main issues only, undertaken with the object of permitting me some commentary on the special point of concern I have identified, and that it does not do justice to the much more thorough and judicious account, of the difficulties that do arise, that Kaye and Rogers offer.

What Schwartz calls the "tuning-in phase" for a social worker "is devoted to making oneself receptive to veiled communications, making use of our knowledge about the issues that tend to be of concern to any particular type of client." He "readies himself to receive cues that are minimal, subtle, devious, and hard to detect except by a very sensitive and discerning instrument." (p 14) This same concern is expressed by Kaye and Rogers in two ways: they have a short but cogent chapter on the sociological and psychological forces that operate among adolescents, that puts a reader onto the kind of sensitive and subtle plane on which a teacher should be working; and they emphasize elsewhere the kind of extra knowledge of his pupils that he will need at a most critical early stage in the undertaking. "From his knowledge of the individual

members of his class, of their hobbies and out-of-school activities, of their conversations both in and out of the classroom, the teacher should have a general idea of the kind of topic or problem which is likely to involve them." "This initial discussion is a highly critical time for the success of the group work. In conducting it, the teacher must learn when to allow children to have their say, even if their contribution appears irrelevant, and when to summarize and formulate ideas which have been expressed only vaguely."(p.43) Thus the two sources deal characteristically with their fundamental agreement on the issue, the one feeling delicately for the "veiled communications" that indicate important ideas beneath the surface, the other acknowledging the theory but reducing it in practical terms to realistic but more open matters that certainly call for extra efforts from the teacher.

The contract, or specification of the work

Schwartz relies heavily on the concept of meeting needs, which recurs frequently in his discussion and in his definitions. Is it unfair of me to expect to see the same concern for meeting the needs of children on the part of schools, beyond some approximation to their traditional interpretations of those needs? It is interesting to see what happens when one translates Schwartz's series of propositions, derived from his governing definition of the group, into equivalent terms in education. The series will lead us on into the next critical phase of a worker's (or teacher's) action vis-à-vis his client group, as he sets things in train. To him a group must be "a collection of people who need each other to work on certain common tasks, in an agency (a school) that is hospitable to those tasks." From this he derives that "the (class) members' need for each other constitutes the basic rationale for their being together." Tasks are "a set of needs converted into work" (p.7) Because the tasks of the school have been designated by society in its division of labour, and are not the same as those deriving from the common needs of the group of students," the convergence of the two sets of tasks - those of the (students) and those of the (school) - creates the terms of the contract," (p 8) and it is in the defining of this contract with his class that the next major challenge to the teacher lies. Here is where that initial discussion takes place that Kaye and Rogers designate as so highly critical. What is the work to be done? The consent and understanding of all concerned, students and school, is required.

Allowing for the fact that the role of a social worker is generally little understood and undefined, and that the members of his group will not take for granted, as children have done in schools (until they question it in adolescence) their purpose in being there, the tasks Schwartz defines for the worker in negotiating the contract are very similar to those Kaye and Roger describe in much greater detail, as "specification of the work", for the teacher. "Simply put, the worker's tasks in this phase are: (a) to make a clear and uncomplicated (unjargonized) statement of why he thinks they are there, of their stake in coming together and the agency's stake in serving them: (b) to describe his own part in the proceedings as

clearly and simply as he can; (c) to reach for the check, for their reactions to his formulation and how his formulation squares with theirs; and (d) to help them do whatever is needed to develop together a working consensus on the terms of the contract and their frame of reference for being together." (Thomas, p.15) What they do together has still to be determined by the group.

By contract, Kaye and Rogers are quite clear that the teacher, in his different circumstances, must be ready with a carefully prepared proposal (though adjustable and provisional) for the outcome of the work the pupils will do in their groups. From then on, he negotiates for their consensus or consent. The children's needs, except as the school sees them, are not necessarily the determining factor, though he is looking for their enthusiastic commitment. "There are many main sources from which group work may be derived: the syllabus, the teacher's interests, the pupils' interests. It is not essential for the success of group work that it derives entirely from children's interests, though it is true that many successful activities do so. What is necessary is that the pupils are given free rein to their initiative in realizing the aim of the work - that is the essential ingredient." And they go on, "Teachers who wish to keep closely to their syllabuses may therefore decide to select a particular topic for group work."

If we keep in mind the idea of a contract, it appears from Kaye and Rogers' approach that the dice is pretty well loaded in favour of the teacher's end of these negotiations, particularly as the conduct of the negotiations depends on his skills in interpreting and encouraging the pupils' point of view. That the authors recognize this is quite clear from the strenuous advice they repeatedly give about handling the discussion, and from the experiences they have had with student teachers in preparing the topics - characteristically students are inclined to prepare in far too great detail "with the result that the areas of choice and initiative open to the children become so limited as to endanger the value of the whole approach." (p.112) Kaye and Rogers are no doubt wise in making entry into this method easy for the average teacher, confident that the experience will gradually challenge and involve him with these new departures. With such propensities as they themselves describe among people who all their lives have been accustomed, and who in all their circumstances are encouraged, to think of teaching as formal, teacher-directed class teaching, this practical leniency on the point of the source of specification of the work could easily backfire. One has seen so many right-minded innovations in education brought to grief at the hands of people whose wrong-mindedness has so often been thought less likely to survive than it actually was. Can the transition into what is, in fact, a radically different attitude towards the role of the learner be made without some radically different demand being made of the teacher at the outset?

Self-selection of groups

Kaye and Rogers devote a great deal of care however to tutoring the reader in the practical conduct of these opening gambits concerning the specification of the work, distinguishing between the need of the teacher to prepare alternatives and make most of the running with pupils unaccustomed

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to group work, and the readiness of experienced pupils to invent and define realistic specifications for themselves. Again, "the teacher must tread a narrow path between the need to give opportunity for full discussion of ideas, and the need to give a sense of purpose and progress." (p.44) Woven into all these very familiar considerations is the timing of the first step, the choosing by the children of the small groups to which they will belong, in the knowledge that the task rests with full consent as to its membership. This principle of self-selection of the groups is strongly stressed as a vital difference from normal practice in schools. Whereas the typical school class is not constituted on Schwartz's basic rationale of "the group members' need for each other," in their firmness on this point about the class breaking into these small groups ("from four to six members is about right for most activities") Kaye and Rogers emphasise the rigour of this basic notion of "a collection of people who need each other to work on certain areas of work." In insisting on this complete freedom of choice they deal correctly and fair-mindedly with all the difficulties that spring to the experienced teacher's mind - placing the unwanted child, manning the less popular tasks, the grouping of "trouble-makers", the efficient division of labour and talents. They know whereof they speak, and are professional in their manner of handling things. "It should be appreciated by now that the actual formation of the groups is a critical matter." (p.52)

Work: a different concept

So to the work itself. The second vital difference that Kaye and Rogers make much of is that of self-direction. "In the main, however, the members of the group decide upon the plan of action in carrying out the work and they are then responsible for putting the plan into effect. This leads to a further characteristic of group work: the group constitutes its own critic and judge of the work in progress." (p.60) They recognise clearly that this implies for the teacher both a change in his customary expectations - or standards of work - and a quite dramatic change in role. Let us take these matters in turn.

Repeatedly throughout the book they return to the same theme, that the process in group work is more significant than the end-product. "The principle by which the teacher should be guided, and of which he may constantly have to remind himself, is that the quality, originality, and general attractiveness of the outcome of the work is far less important than the extent to which it is a genuine reflection of the children's own enterprise and effort." High standards in the end-product "should be achieved not through the teacher's .....insistence upon them, but as a result of the children's own developing critical standards." (p.39) If we turn to Schwartz, we find the same thing put with a characteristic difference. "The moving dynamic in the group experience is work. Let me define the term "work" as I am using it: a) each member is trying to harness the others to his own sense of need; b) the interaction between members thus reflects both the centripetal force of the common tasks and the centrifugal force of those tasks that are unique to each member: and c) there is a flow of affect among the members - negative and positive in varying degrees - generated by their investment in each other, their

sense of common cause, and the demands of the quid pro quo."(p.8) "The group process is not a panacea; the members must work for everything they get; they must invest hearts and minds in the process; and they need all the help they can get in doing so." (p.9) This demand for work "is, in fact, the only one the worker (or teacher) makes - not for certain preconceived results, or approved attitudes, or learned behaviours, but for the work itself." (p.11)

"Work" in English

I have given room to Schwartz's views because of their unmistakable challenge to conventional ideas of work in education - and I do not apologise for putting it that way just because Schwartz wasn't speaking to educators when he wrote those words. Kaye and Rogers would endorse much if not all of what he says; however, their strategy is not to challenge but to persuade. It is no doubt because my concern is with English in particular that I value the uncompromising position that results from translating Schwartz's social work position into educational terms, for it is peculiarly appropriate to the new directions that English curriculum is taking. Since the remarkable [redacted] Dartmouth Conference of 1966, at which for an entire month some fifty leading figures in the teaching of English from the United States and the United Kingdom tangled with each other's cultures and prejudices until they reached some far-seeing agreements, these directions have been away from a subject whose content is literature, towards a subject whose process is in language and personal growth. James Moffett's influential work on the English curriculum, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, begins with his identification of it as, not a content subject, but a symbol system subject. "Symbol systems are not primarily about themselves; they are about other subjects." (p.6) "The most natural assumption about teaching any symbol system should be that the student employ his time using that system in every realistic way that it can be used, not that he analyze it or study it as an object." (p.7) Accordingly, "What a student about language needs is not external facts but more insight about what he and his peers are doing verbally and what they could be doing ... The teacher's art is to open up the whole range of external social operations that will lead to internal, cognitive operations. He does this by getting students to feed back to each other." (p.93) And again, "I am concerned here with how they talk...".

It is not surprising that the aim of such an English teacher as Moffett describes should largely coincide with the aims of a social worker. When Schwartz says this about the worker's tasks, an English teacher is with him: "Not only must the worker be able to help people talk but he must help them to talk to each other; the talk must be purposeful, related to the contract that holds them together; it must have feeling in it, for without affect there is no investment; and it must be about real things, not a charade, or a false consensus, or a game designed to produce the illusion of work without risking anything in the process." (p.12)

Work - the teacher's role

Whereas Schwartz's prescription for the worker's role is resonant with emphasis on his attention to feeling, Kaye and Rogers' very comprehensive advice on the teacher's role is preoccupied with asking questions, not

~~not~~ pointing out mistakes, coming in with advice "when they are genuinely stumped", and maintaining and recording progress, all apparently oriented towards the problems of the task, rather than towards those of the people doing it. The emotional commitment of the children is not ignored, but neither is it particularly cultivated. The teacher is warned against the surprising change in role that will be forced upon him. "His next most difficult problem will be that of doing nothing! He will have to accustom himself to a passive role and to accept that, other things being equal, the less he is legitimately occupied in dealing with his pupils, the better his teaching is going... When we come to group work, we find we have suddenly become redundant - or so it seems ... We can even leave the classroom and return ten minutes later and nobody seems to have missed us. If we are entirely honest with ourselves, we are even jealous of the involvement which our pupils now have with their work, and if we are human, we miss their old dependence on ourselves. It takes some time before we are comfortable in our new role..." (p.34-35)

It is well said, and in more ways than one presents an attractive prospect, though the authors are at pains to point out the many preparatory and processual tasks that the teacher incurs when he gets into group work. But the relative impersonality of the role, changed though it is in the one respect of the requirement that he dominate the classroom, remains otherwise familiar; his responsibility is still "that the momentum of the work itself is never lost through any failure on his part to be ready with the requisite machinery for any given step". (p.36) The idea that he has the task of "detecting and challenging the obstacles to work as these obstacles arise, of contributing ideas, facts, and values from his own perspective when he thinks such data may be useful to the members in dealing with the problems under consideration, and of lending his own vision and projecting his own feelings about the struggles in which they are engaged," (Schwartz p.16; my italics) is a somewhat different message about rather different responsibilities; must it remain heard only in another field?

Conclusion

Both resources I have used here agree with each other, in their very different styles, on the same critical conditions that determine the success of group work. That they should do so is not so surprising, for there is by now a large body of psychological and sociological exploration in theory and research behind small group work. Their stock of knowledge in each case, however, was built up in practical experience in their separate fields. They establish that the teacher or worker must be highly sensitive and "tuned-in" to the interests and needs of the group members: that there must be a successful negotiation of agreement between the interests of the members and the aims of the agency, or school, on the specification of work to be done, or the contract; that the group must be self-selected, composed of people who need each other to do the work; that the group must be self-directing in its carrying out of the work; that

consequently the teacher, or worker, must be attentive to the process rather than to the end product, and must adopt a role that serves the authority of the group rather than his own. They differ in their emphasis on the role of feelings in their conception of the work to be done, and consequently in the nature of the responsibilities of the teacher or worker in helping the work to get done.

I am conscious that in selecting and presenting comparable and contrasting portions of these two works I have not only made it unlikely that either would get fair representation; I feel that I have certainly tended to give Schwartz's remarks some rhetorical advantage over Kaye and Rogers. It is an unrateful thing to have done, for I have seen few books in education that are as fair-minded and have such a sure sense of touch in ordering a complexity of considerations. At every point they inform the reader of the alternatives and leave him to make his choice with open eyes. My reservations have been based, I realize, partly in an awareness of the cultural differences between two countries, differences that will subtly and profoundly affect actions, yet are very difficult to assert in the confines of a paper like this in any defensible way. I would assert that in the British context their strategy may be right and workable. In a tradition of empiricism one arrives at a consensus by persisting on trying things out, and can count on obtaining people's ready recognition of those things that turn out to be decent to do. On this continent, with so many differences about values in our mixed inheritance of cultures, it seems that consensus must be found before new actions are set in train - we are less secure in our judgments in novel sets of relationships. Teachers (and administrators and parents) must see to the end what they are getting into before they accept the means: otherwise they may subvert the means or reject them after inadequate trial. It is the misuse of group work to the same old ends of teacher-dominated instruction that I fear, if the necessary alterations in his self-image, to a role that has a low profile and moreover makes specific demands on his humanity, are not made plain and acceptable to the teacher in the first place.

On all the practical difficulties of easing the free-wheeling group work process into the rather inflexible and cramped accommodations of the school system, one cannot but defer to the advice of Kaye and Rogers. In this they are extraordinarily useful. They make the way clear, from the first step for both teacher and children away from the customary routines, to the later thrusts of the experienced group into a wide-ranging freedom of action. This is the direction that English teaching especially must take. But there are many forces in conflict in the school and the community as well as within his own personality that will hold the less assured teacher back to the early stages only, and in the circumstances the new tasks and demands might well prove too much for him and the pupils. The best English teacher is one who knows without being told the kind of things Schwartz is talking about, and will be confident in providing that kind of emotional support, for he embodies it in his own stabilities. The less secure person, such as most of us are, is not far from that kind of confidence and can yet acquire it, particularly through seeking to support it in his pupils, if only he can be helped to see in the midst of his struggles the positive elements of the role as others define and endorse it.

I shall quote from Schwartz one last illuminating warning, about stating "your goals" for the student, which he gives in positing what he calls"the principle of parallel processes"; by which I mean that the worker has his tasks and the client has his, that these processes are interdependent but different, and that any violation of this division of labor renders the work dysfunctional and the encounter itself manipulative, sentimental, and generally frustrating for both parties. (p. 10) Few phrases could more aptly describe what goes so frequently wrong in the tone of our schools.

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