

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **“I’m Not Going to No Library”: Exploring the Use of a Collegiate Discussion Group for Staff Working With Children Out of School**

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#### **Abstract**

This contribution to *Other Education* follows the narrative of two cases from the point of view of a school inclusion service. It illustrates that school exclusion can have a negative impact on children’s learning motivation and self-esteem. Through the reflective space of a work discussion group set up to support the one-to-one teachers in the service, the narrative shows children with unidentified special needs can be punished with exclusion for behaviour they may not be able to control.

This contribution considers a local authority has a duty to provide education for these isolated children. Yet, one-to-one teaching is an expensive provision. At the same time these “school drop-outs” are often deemed as “hopeless cases,” and when they fail to turn up because they are past the point of motivation, they present a challenge for the local authority staff managing “squeezed” budgets. Bureaucratic delay for educational psychologist assessments adds to lost development time, reducing education, yet apparently reinforcing it.

The children themselves have lost all belief in their capacity to learn. The teacher has to actively re-awaken their belief that

they can learn and develop. For example, one pupil kept tearing up his work and throwing it into the bin in the public library where he was being taught. The work discussion group wondered whether he himself felt thrown away and of no value to society.

The two case studies discussed in this paper illustrate typical problems confronting the children and teachers in the school inclusion service used for discussion herein. Whatever the child’s original problem, the management of the problem child by the education system can create further difficulties for the child to overcome.

#### **Key words**

School inclusion, Learning motivation, Isolation, Social Anxiety, School Exclusion

#### **Introduction**

Six years ago with the support of my manager, I set up a work discussion group for one-to-one teachers who are part of a school inclusion service. This service provides education for children who are not attending school. The teachers teach them in the children’s own homes or in public places such as libraries. Previously isolated

in their roles, the purpose of the work discussion group was to provide a reflective space where the teachers could share the impact of working on their own with children presenting with complex physical, emotional and psychological states.

In this paper I will describe the work of these teachers to show by way of two illustrative cases, how work discussion supports them in their role. Both cases demonstrate how children deemed as “hopeless cases,” often excluded from their schools, can lose their self-belief and motivation to learn. The work discussion group enables teachers to look beyond the blizzard of multiple family and individual problems the children (and they as teachers attending to these children’s issues) encounter. It can facilitate the exploration of unconscious social defences of an education system playing an on-going part in hindering the educational opportunities of these failing children.

In respect of confidentiality, all pupil and teacher names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

### **Trying to Connect Through the Blizzard: Freddie, Age 14.**

“Very intelligent and has a great way with English. He is extremely organised and studies really well. He is overall, a top student” (School Report age 12)

Freddie was fourteen years old, when one of the teachers, Valerie, presented his case to the work discussion group. She had gone with a male re-integration officer (charged with facilitating Freddie’s return to mainstream schooling) to meet Freddie for

the first time at his home. His mother had been trying to persuade him to come downstairs. As the visitors arrived, they heard Freddie shouting from upstairs, “Fuck off.” Looking at Freddie’s behaviour psychologically, could we ask if he was in identification with the secondary school that had excluded him? Did he feel that his school had told *him* to “fuck off”?

The re-integration officer suggested Freddie start lessons with Valerie the following week, meeting to this end in the local library. He responded, “I’m not going to no library.” His mother intervened saying, “You have to explain why.” Freddie replied, “I’m not having that moppet in my house.” On hearing this, the work discussion group commented that there seemed to be a problem with Freddie’s parenting and in the house in general. There appeared to be no adult in charge and the only male present, his uncle, proved to be too weak, leaving Freddie as the dominant figure in the household. Through his contempt towards the Re-integration Officer, was he trying to re-establish his damaged male ego? Did the omnipotent Freddie feel his masculinity threatened by another male who had entered his house? In the group we wondered if Freddie had enacted at school the dominant position he held in his family and it had backfired. Was the hurt part of the “self” reacting by keeping his door closed, just as the school doors had been closed on him?

Valerie did not manage to meet him on her first visit. We continued to discuss possible reasons for his anger and refusal to come downstairs. We saw Freddie as the victim of a familiar blizzard of family problems. His parents were frequently in conflict, which impacted on his ability to

concentrate and learn. There were concerns that he had made inappropriate comments on social media, which may have been a contributory factor to his being assaulted by two other students at school. He was eventually excluded following an incident of “extreme rudeness to a member of staff” and was described as, “a health and safety risk to himself and others.” Prior to his exclusion, the school believed there had been a serious decline in his mental health. We wondered if Freddie, who had long been a victim was now becoming the aggressor. Was he now in identification with the ‘excluders’ and in turn excluding Valerie?

The following week, Valerie and the Re-integration officer returned to the house. Freddie did manage to come downstairs to meet them. In an attempt to engage with him Valerie asked Freddie for a glass of water and was struck by the way he immediately brought it and politely handed it to her. The teachers listening in the group were intrigued by this sudden change from hostility to politeness in his manner. We observed together in discussion how he was able to respond positively to Valerie as long as she was not touching what we considered was the traumatic injury to his hurt learning function, caused by his exclusion. In distracting him from talking about lessons, she was able to catch a glimpse of who Freddie really was.

In spite of this positive contact, he still refused to have lessons. Thus, for several weeks Valerie turned up to his home to deliver work. Eventually she got him to meet her in the library although at first he did not respond well to this environment. If another young person entered the library, Freddie would quickly

hide himself under the table, which might suggest that he felt ashamed and humiliated to be seen in a public place with a teacher instead of in his place at school. Valerie would report to the work discussion group that Freddie had refused to do the work she had prepared for him. He was angry and frequently tore it up and threw it into the bin. Was he trying to drive her away to protect the hurt learning part whilst she, inversely, was trying to get near him to heal the wound? I noticed Valerie slumped in her chair as she spoke and could see the expression of hopelessness on her face, as she raised her hands asking, “What am I supposed to do?” Freddie had accepted the relationship with her, but he was still not able to allow her to teach him.

Through her counter-transference we were witnessing Valerie’s unconscious identification with Freddie as she projected her feelings of hopelessness and failure into the group who were there to re-energise her to keep going back in the hope of re-connecting with this child. In sharing the burden with colleagues, it is suggested Valerie was less likely to become overwhelmed and give up.

In order to help Valerie with her own feeling of rejection by Freddie the discussion group wondered if throwing the work she provided into the bin meant that he himself felt thrown away and of no value to society; whether his disconnect from education could partly be due to family dynamics and partly due to the seemingly traumatic impact of exclusion by the school. His case was not unlike many of the other children we had discussed together where it was difficult to identify the multiple causes of what appeared to be self-hatred.

Although he had previously been a “top student,” as he moved up the school it became apparent Freddie was performing “significantly below the expected levels” in all of the core subjects. Had the school system missed something about him? What had caused this unexpected change? Special Educational Needs assessments have become increasingly difficult to obtain due to budgetary cuts and policy issues but the group felt that such assessment was exactly what Freddie needed to find out if he had any specific learning difficulties. Many of these failing children have unidentified learning needs that translate into behavioural issues in class, hence branding them as trouble-makers. They have lost all belief in their capacity to learn by the time they have been exited by exclusion from the school. Their then subsequent inability to use one-to-one teaching time provided by the council as out of school educational provision sometimes then leads to the school inclusion service referring to them as “a waste of time and money.” The free library space represents the inclusion service’s ambivalence towards them; teaching time is an expensive provision so why waste even more resources on a more expensive venue for uncooperative children. But the public humiliation in the library compounds the humiliation of school exclusion. It further undermines the teacher’s efforts to re-engage the children. In this way the inclusion service’s ambivalence towards the children undermines its own teachers.

### **Finding the Part that Wants to Learn**

Valerie’s aim was to re-awaken in Freddie the belief that he could learn and develop. Her task was not unlike that of a mother

getting her crying baby ready for feeding, when she takes the baby to her breast and then first soothes him so he is in a good state to feed. In bearing his pain along the way, Valerie managed to soothe Freddie’s wound so that he was eventually ready to learn. He was gradually able to let go of demanding control. This occurred in response to well set routines and boundaries laid down by Valerie and he slowly re-gained confidence in himself and his ability to learn. There was a dramatic improvement in his attendance. He even stopped hiding under the table when other young people entered the library; instead hiding merely behind his hood.

Towards the end of the school year, there was a network meeting regarding Freddie’s progress and educational future. The school inclusion team was in a hurry to end his one-to-one lessons. His individual tuition had become too costly for the squeezed budget of the local authority. As he was making progress he was told he would be moving on to a small group. Two new teachers were being employed to teach groups of three in another local library. Freddie was not pleased with the news of this intermediate arrangement in another nowhere place and did not feel he would be able to cope. At the same time another common problem emerged. Despite his progress it appeared that Freddie was not welcome in any mainstream school including the school from which he had been excluded. Valerie told us she had tried to recommend him to a local school for the start of his GCSE year but the school were not interested because they were worried about reports of his previous behaviour. His progress with Valerie was remarkable and she was adamant his behaviour had improved as a result. But the school could

not be convinced, so he continued to be excluded, stigmatised by past behavioural difficulties.

In his final lesson, Freddie handed Valerie some written feedback on the time he had spent in lessons with her. It was very articulate and expressed his thanks for “everything you have done to help me.” Valerie shared this with the work discussion group and it was very moving to read. He spoke about how she had “changed my life” and “given me hope that I have never felt before.” He said how much he was going to miss her. We were astonished at both the quality and the quantity as we read through numerous pages of writing by the “top student” who had reappeared.

Freddie said he could not cope with other students and did not want a male teacher but Valerie told him, “You can do it. You didn’t think you could get this far and look at you now. You should be very proud of yourself. I am certainly proud of you.” The intensity with which she spoke made the group realise that Freddie’s fears of leaving her were resonating with her own anxiety that it was too soon for him to be moved on. The group helped her to express her own feelings about the situation.

What I am drawing attention to through this case example from the work discussion group is that whatever the child’s original problem, the management of the problem child by the education system adds further difficulties for the child to overcome. First there is the trauma of being excluded, the shame, the humiliation, the anger and the wish to hide. Secondly, when progress has been made, the child has to face the reluctance of mainstream schools to having them back. Jolanta

Lasota, chief executive of the charity Ambitious about Autism said, “The impact of these exclusions can’t be overestimated—not only do children fall behind academically, but the isolation from their peers creates deep unhappiness, social anxiety and mental health problems that can continue long into adulthood.” The child with a problem that disturbs the smooth running of educational systems becomes an expensive nuisance that arouses hostility as well as concern.

### **Thomas, Aged 7**

“He’s the sweetest child ever”

When Jenna presented seven-year-old Thomas, who had been excluded from his primary school that was in special measures, as a case to our discussion group, the teachers looked shocked. They wondered how a child so young could have warranted such a damaging punishment. Thomas had had two fixed-term exclusions prior to the most recent incident when he did not want to return to the classroom from the playground at the end of break time. School staff tried to persuade him but he refused so they attempted to physically drag him inside. One staff member pulled him by his hand but he resisted and ended up with scratches from the teacher’s fingernails. As he continued to resist, Thomas fell to the ground by which time he was kicking and screaming causing staff to hold down both his arms and legs until eventually, they managed to lift him up and carry him inside. Thomas was then given his third fixed term exclusion for “kicking, biting, punching and being disobedient to staff.” The impact of exclusion on Thomas was reflected in his first words to the Child

and Adolescent Mental Health Service when he met them following this incident. He entered the therapy room saying, "I'm a bad boy."

Jenna described to us her first lesson with Thomas where they were playing a Maths game. He was very engaged for the first ten minutes and then lost all concentration and started to move the cards around all over the desk, so Jenna changed the activity to a word game involving words that rhymed. She asked him, "Which part of the sentence rhymes?" Thomas was silent so she repeated the question three times but still he remained silent. Then all of a sudden, he shouted, "I just saw a bird flying." Jenna said, "Listen Thomas. Listen. Look at me. Repeat this sentence after me." She was trying to connect to the part that could learn and wanted to learn but Thomas was only able to repeat the first few words of the sentence. She said it was becoming clear that this little boy had no retention of information so "If he can't do that, just imagine him in a classroom with all the information and instructions that are flying around at one time." Through calm, skilful work, she was taking the time to find out why this child was not able to keep up in school. He was unable to concentrate so surely this must be communicating something. We wondered why none of Thomas's primary school teachers had tried to unpick his problem. Instead he had been judged purely on behaviour, was labelled a bad boy and this had become his new identity.

Jenna had a broken leg at the time and when one of her crutches fell onto the floor Thomas immediately picked it up. At the end of the lesson he reached down for her handbag and gave it to her saying, "so you won't have to bend down to pick it up."

When she praised and thanked him for his thoughtfulness, he replied, "I'm not really a bad boy." Jenna said he was "the sweetest child ever" and that his education was being "sabotaged by a school in special measures." Just like Freddie with the glass of water, Jenna was experiencing what this little boy was really like.

The work discussion group expressed concern that a child so young and with unidentified special needs could be excluded so many times from his school. Jenna was clearly forming a positive relationship with Thomas but despite the supportive work she was doing, after just six weeks, he was going to be moved on.

The Primary Inclusion Forum, created to support children at risk of permanent exclusion, had found Thomas a place in a school for children with severe learning difficulties, behavioural problems and aggression. His mother agreed with this proposal but on learning more about the school, she quickly withdrew her consent, saying her son would not benefit in this environment. She said the behaviour that led to her son's exclusion, was a reaction to being restrained and that he did not display such behaviour in any setting other than his primary school. A different school was then identified for Thomas.

I could see the impact of Jenna's fears on the faces of all the teachers present as we wondered why this vulnerable child was being moved on so quickly. We thought about what she could do to protect Thomas from further trauma by being placed in an unfamiliar school environment. We came up with a plan that Jenna would ask to meet the Head of the new school to explain Thomas's situation and what she had discovered about his needs. She would ask

if she could support him in school until he settled in and found his way.

### **Cutting the Service but Not the Need**

Following government cuts to education in 2012, councils lost huge sums of money resulting in cuts to school breakfast clubs, family support groups and Sure Start services. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said last year that, between 2009-10 and 2017-18, school spending per pupil in England fell by about eight per cent. The Primary Learning Support Service provides one-to-one support in the classroom for children with special needs to ensure they stay in school. There are now only two or three specialist teachers in this service where previously there had been thirty. If Thomas had had access to this support his needs would have been identified and he could have avoided exclusion, the most severe form of punishment available to schools. The *Review of School Exclusion*, published by Edward Timpson in May 2019, states that, “Vulnerable groups of children are more likely to be excluded, with 78 per cent of permanent exclusions issued to children who had special educational needs (SEN p.33).” The Primary Learning Support Service has been cut but the need clearly remains.

### **Social Defences of a School System**

After six weeks of teaching the plan set out for Thomas was to attend his new primary school for one hour every day, then go to the library to meet Jenna for a one hour lesson, followed by a session with PACE, a service that provides activities and trips to occupy children who are out of school. Jenna believed this would be overwhelming for Thomas who was clearly struggling to keep up just being in one

place, let alone three. The Re-integration Officer contacted the school on her behalf, and was told by the Headteacher, “I don’t want that teacher coming in to my school messing up all my systems,” demonstrating a social defence against having an unknown teacher with a stigmatised child entering her school premises and possibly creating what she deemed might be chaos.

This same Headteacher had originally refused Thomas’s application. It was only when his mother threatened to take the case to a tribunal that the school accepted her son. But they would only agree to take him for one hour a day, demonstrating an unconscious desire to give the child less.

When Jenna heard she was not allowed to go into the school, she contacted the Headteacher herself. At first she received a hostile response but on discovering that she, when part of the Primary Learning Support Service, had previously supported a pupil at this school and was familiar with the school’s systems, the Head responded with, “Oh yes, I remember you now” and immediately let go of her defences by agreeing to meet with Jenna to discuss Thomas’s case. When they met in person the Headteacher agreed to her supporting Thomas in school but said they would have to do a risk assessment and ensure that everything was in place “just in case Thomas has to be restrained.” It was becoming clear that this school as well as his previous school, was putting up social defences against bearing and containing Thomas’s projection of his pain. A seven-year-old child who resisted an assault by teachers in the playground was now seen as “needing restraint.” Would he, just like Freddie, have to bear the stigma of being troublesome, until his new school

was able to look beyond the surface to discover “the sweetest child ever”?

### **Turning Pain and Despair into Hope**

At our next work discussion meeting the news of Thomas was eagerly awaited. Jenna informed us that both Occupational Therapy and Educational Psychology assessments had been carried out and Thomas was identified as having attention span difficulty and physical attention difficulty. On hearing this, one of the teachers asked, “Was this the genesis of what happened in the playground that day?” prompting the group to imagine just how devastating it must have been for Thomas whilst being restrained on the ground.

Thomas was attending his new primary school every day now, was doing really well and so far there were no reports of any behavioural problems. His mother said to Jenna through tears of relief, “My little boy’s going to be alright now. Thank you so much.” Jenna went back to see the Headteacher and told her, “Can you see what you have done. You have picked this little boy up and given him a chance. We regularly get pupils aged fourteen and fifteen when in many cases it’s already too late to save them. You have saved Thomas from ending up on the streets and possibly from a life of crime.” I watched the smile on Jenna’s face as she spoke and could not help thinking she had said these words to protect Thomas from the risk of further damage. She was clearly the person who had picked Thomas up from the ground, but in allowing his new Headteacher to believe that it was all her doing, she was hoping the latter would feel proud enough to maintain some responsibility for the wellbeing of this vulnerable child.

### **Conclusion**

The Children’s Commissioner for England, Ann Longfield and Coram’s Charity Chief Executive Dr Carol Homden, senior experts in the field, recently told a local newspaper how exclusions can have a lasting impact on young people’s lives. According to the *Timpson Review of School Exclusion* (2019), the outcome for excluded children is poor. Although still below the levels of the 1990s, the Review states the number of permanent and temporary exclusions has been rising since 2013. In January 2019, the then Education Secretary Damian Hinds, stated in the House of Commons that schools had more money “than ever before in the history of the country,” nevertheless the experience on the ground is that services for children with special needs have been drastically cut.

Schools exclude children in order to protect a calm, safe environment for learning and as a social defence against disorder and fear of chaos. The school inclusion service exists to provide education for these out-of-school children and where possible return them to mainstream schooling. The two case studies discussed in this paper illustrate typical problems confronting the children and the teachers in this service.

Children who, for whatever reason, have been excluded from school, more often than not end up withdrawing to their bedrooms where they can become isolated from all contact. They are left trapped by feelings of shame and humiliation, despair and hopelessness, and a loss of motivation resulting in a self-hatred that can sometimes lead to suicidal feelings. Their aggression towards the system can transform the system into one that hates the child. The failing child creates a failing

system as without a special educational needs assessment, no one really knows how to deal with the hurt part hidden behind the blizzard of behavioural problems surrounding them.

The school inclusion service itself operating on squeezed budgets finds the many wasted teaching sessions hard to accept, sometimes regarding the children as a waste of time and money. The cost of one-to-one tuition creates a tendency to compound the disadvantage of school exclusion by moving excluded children on too quickly, leaving them vulnerable to further damage and hurt. Mainstream schools are reluctant to have previous failures returning. Having once stigmatised the child as a threat to school order, they find it difficult to accept that the child may have changed and made progress. They prefer to keep these children shut out rather than risking a repeated negative impact on their system.

While the skilled one-to-one teachers are vital to the survival of these excluded children and the repair of their shattered self-esteem, they must be careful not to over-engage, or get lost, diverted or overwhelmed by the multiple problems along the way. Instead and in spite of all

the social defences they are faced with in the education system they must keep searching for the lost part of the child that wants to learn. It is within the reflective space of the work discussion group in the school inclusion service that these teachers are able to overcome the feelings of hopelessness, despair and hatred that are projected into them and to keep offering resilience and self-belief to the child, turning pain, failure and despair into hope.

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