

Evaluation of Support Groups

A groupwork approach to support children with SEBN

Sponsored by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Pupil, teacher and parent perceptions of the impact of Support Groups upon children in Upper Primary and Lower Secondary, including a transition project spanning both.



The Study

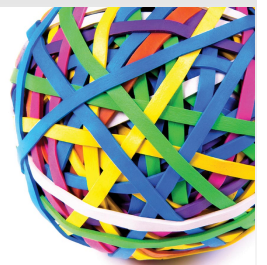
The project investigated the efficacy of a groupwork approach to support children (aged 10-14) who were regarded as having Social, Emotional and Behavioural Needs (or were at risk of developing such). It was conducted in two Scottish local authorities – Aberdeenshire and Falkirk – and constituted six clusters of Primary and Secondary schools. The study constituted three projects: one for Primary 6 pupils; one for Secondary 2 pupils; and one – the transition project – which spanned Primary 7 and Secondary 1.

- 63 pupils (46 boys and 17 girls) participated within Support Groups and these pupils were matched with comparator pupils who were considered to be achieving well at school
- 19 support group pupils participated within the Pr 6 project; 18 within the transition project; and 26 within the S2 project and statistical data were gathered in respect of all pupils relating to behaviour and attendance
- All pupils completed pre- and post-closed-response questionnaires focusing upon a wide range of indicators, such as relationships between staff and pupils

Contact Details

If you would like further information about this study or about the approach in general, please contact Dr Joan Mowat at joan.mowat@strath.ac.uk.

<http://www.usingsupportgroups.org.uk>



Using
Support Groups
to **Improve**
Behaviour

Joan Mowat

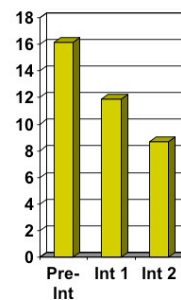
The Support Group approach is based upon social constructivist principles, focusing upon helping children to come to an understanding of themselves and others.

The Study

- A sample of pupils completed an open-questionnaire (1 from each group) as did their parents/guardians, Support Group Leaders and a sample of their class teachers
- Interviews were conducted with six case study pupils (one from each cluster), their parents/guardians, their Support Group Leader(s), Pastoral Care Teacher (Secondary) and Class Teacher (Primary) at the end of intervention. The case study pupils were carefully chosen to be representative of the Support Group population as a whole (account was taken of gender, age and the degree of initial concern about the pupil).
- Further interviews were carried out a year later with the six case study pupils and their Support Group Leader and/or Pastoral Care Teacher.
- Six focus group discussions took place with Support Group Leaders, involving 26 staff and they also completed individual questionnaires, evaluating the approach against 'Journey to Excellence.'

'The structured discussions within the support group are quite deep sometimes. They really get to the 'nitty gritty' and I still feel now, and I said before, that the approach has an awful lot to offer. You have that time to discuss in a non-judgemental setting – you can talk about their behaviour – you just build up relationships and they can see that you are working with them ...' (SG Leader)

Trends in Attendance



- Pre-Intervention, highly statistical differences emerged between Sg and Comp pupils
- After 8 weeks, no longer highly significant
- After 16 weeks, not significant
- This is a remarkable transformation in a relatively short time period

Fig. 1: Illustration of differential in attendance between SG & Comparator pupils over period of intervention



Support Group Leaders in Denny Cluster, Falkirk

Support for Staff

Staff, principally Support for Learning, in participating schools were offered 4 days of INSET which focused upon the rationale for and theoretical underpinnings of the approach; its implementation and evaluation. Schools were organised in clusters of Secondary/Primary schools within which a cluster leader took responsibility for the smooth running of the project with the support of the research team. Support groups operated for twenty weeks for 1hr per week with four pupils (on average) in each group. Support Group Leaders working on the transition project worked together with the group over the transition to smooth the transition period for pupils.

The Findings: Pupil Outcomes

Whilst pupils (and their parents) were understandably anxious when asked to participate within a support group, the majority of pupils responded positively to the approach and benefited positively from it. One of the most unexpected findings was that the disparity in attendance between support group pupils and the comparator group (which was initially highly statistically significant) was no longer significant after intervention (cc. Fig. 1).

In comparing the pre- and post-intervention closed-questionnaires, it became evident that the highly statistically significant differentials which had initially been in evidence on a wide range of indicators between the support group and comparator pupils, whilst still of statistical significance, had lessened to a considerable extent. This was a consistent trend (as can be seen in the chart opposite).

Examination of the case studies proved to be the richest source of data as it enabled an in-depth study of the progress of the pupils from the perspectives of the pupils themselves and those who were most closely involved with them. As might be expected, outcomes varied to a considerable extent from pupil to pupil but the following were in evidence:

- Pupils had a greater awareness of their behaviour and its impact upon others
- Pupils had developed a greater capacity to self-regulate their behaviour
- Pupils relationships with peers, teachers and family members had generally improved
- Pupils demonstrated more concern for others and were able to empathise more with others

Pre-Post Comparison of Self-Assessment Questionnaires

Significance of Differential between Sg & Comparator Pupils

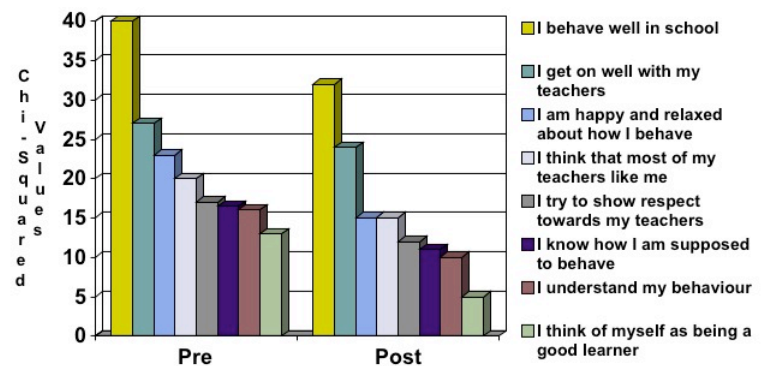


Fig. 2: Illustration of the statistical difference between SG & comparator pupils before and after intervention on the 10 indicators with the greatest differential between both groups initially

- Pupils reported feeling more confident in themselves
- There was evidence of more positive dispositions towards learning and towards school.

Not all pupils, as might be expected, experienced positive outcomes. For some pupils, this was related to feelings of unease on being seen to be different from other pupils and with the target-setting process.

'He was, he's a boy that I would have thought was quite switched off from learning so that got lots of 'brownie points from me'. I hadnae been aware a' how much we was valuing the group really.' (SG Leader)

The Findings: Lessons Learned

Support Groups were seen as providing a supportive, caring environment in which pupils could talk in confidence about things which were important to them, founded upon the trusting relationships which formed between the Support Group Leader and the pupils and between the pupils themselves. It was seen as a non-judgemental approach. Pupils were not 'getting into trouble' but could talk through their behaviour and come to an understanding of it with the support of others in the group. It was seen as a progressive and comprehensive approach, bringing together under one umbrella many different strategies which could be adopted in supporting pupils. The approach was seen to promote deeper learning and thinking skills as pupils were encouraged to probe beneath their attitudes, values and beliefs.

Things which were crucial to the success of support groups were:

- ✚ the support of the senior management of the school
- ✚ a responsive approach – modifying and adapting the approach to the needs of the school and to individual pupils whilst preserving the integrity of the approach
- ✚ a whole-school approach – all staff in the school being aware of the approach and what it sets out to achieve and being supportive of the processes
- ✚ the support of parents, and parents working in partnership with the school
- ✚ high quality professional development for staff
- ✚ the leadership, commitment and skills of Support Group Leaders.

The approach was seen to be fully in line with current developments in Scottish Education such as 'Curriculum for Excellence', 'Getting it right for every child', Rights Respecting Schools, Restorative approaches, Nurture and Feuerstein's Instrumental Enrichment. Further to the study, the approach has been developed across networks of schools in Aberdeenshire as *Supporting Positive Futures and Transitions*.

Dr Joan Mowat is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Strathclyde.



'Hopefully, the higher authorities in this school and other schools realise the good in the programme and hopefully other children can benefit as well. But then, again, that is due to the parents. You cannot have a programme like this in school only if it's without the support of the parents.'
(Parent of SG pupil)

'They should keep it open, keep it up, because it has helped me a lot, as you hear, and it's just one of the best things that's happened to XXX (the school) (SG pupil)



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