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'Talking Stones': A Technique for Interviewing Disaffected Young People

The use of an interview technique called 'Talking Stones' which facilitates discussion with Darren described by his teachers as disaffected and unresponsive, is seen as a way to understand the disaffected pupils' own perspectives on their education.

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SEEKING PUPIL PERSPECTIVES

Over the past few years in the UK, legal, pragmatic and moral considerations have led to an increasing emphasis on seeking pupils' own perspectives on their education. Child self-advocacy is now supported by international law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Article 12 states:

(1) Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

In the UK, pragmatic and moral arguments are raised in support of child self-advocacy in the *Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs* (DfE, 1994) where the benefits of involving the pupil in plans for his/her future education are seen as:

- **pragmatic** - children have important and relevant information. Their support is crucial to the effective implementation of any individual education programme (DfE, 1994, 1:3)
- **principle** - children have a right to be heard. They should be encouraged to participate in decision-making about provision to meet their special educational needs. (DfE, 1994, 2:35)

APPROACHES TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

One group of pupils whose own perspective it is particularly important to seek is those who are disaffected from school. One serious issue raised by the UK government Green Paper *Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs* is that failure to address the 'problems' of non-engagement with their education of significant numbers of disaffected pupils costs society dearly "both in terms of reduced economic contribution in adult life and for some, of criminal activity and prison" (DfEE, 1997, p. 78).

There is a view that "All actions serve some useful purpose for the actor" (Ravenette, 1984, p. 22). The challenge for those concerned with supporting children is to discover what this purpose is. Teenage boys, especially those who are disaffected from school, are often not the easiest people to interview. Some, like Larry, an inmate in one of HM prisons and interviewed recently about his recollection of school, may reject any overture by teachers:

I really didn't want teachers to know me ... They just did their job and no more. I got help when I wanted it - eventually. I didn't want teachers hanging around me. Explain, then go away - that's what I preferred.

Like Larry, others may feel that one-to-one discussion on a personal level is unwarranted intrusion into their privacy.

'TALKING STONES'

One method of facilitating discussion with some pupils is that of 'Talking Stones'. This is a powerful projective technique derived from techniques related to Personal Construct Psychology and developed from Simon Crosby's therapeutic work with adults (unpublished report, 1993, Centre for Personal Construct Education). During an interview, pupils are given a pile of stones of varying shapes, sizes, colours and textures and encouraged to explore their thoughts and feelings about school and themselves by investing meaning in these stones. This technique is illustrated here with reference to an interview carried out with 15-year-old Darren, a pupil in an urban comprehensive secondary school in a socio-economically deprived area in the English Midlands. He was one of a group of pupils who agreed to be interviewed during the course of a small-scale research project in 1998 which aimed to investigate the personal perspectives of young people experiencing feelings of disaffection from school.

All the interviews were carried out in the privacy of the office of a Head of Year and were recorded on audiotape.

DARREN

Darren was described by his teachers as:

- **'at very high risk of exclusion' from his school as a result of acts of deviance such as the theft of master keys to the school premises and open verbal defiance of staff in lessons**
- **taciturn to the point of never acknowledging his name when the class register was called and never talking to staff about anything of personal interest to himself**
- **uninterested in anything school had to offer except in the area of sport**
- **quite frequently under the influence of drugs of one kind or another**
- **suspected by the police of petty crime in the vicinity**
- **a personage feared by many of his peers**

Darren's story

At the outset of the interview Darren was shown twenty stones of various sorts and asked to look at their colours and feel their textures. Subsequently he was invited to find one that was reminiscent of what he was like in some way:

Author: Have a good rootle through this pile of stones ... can you pick out one that shows what you're like as a person?

Darren sorted through the pile of stones, looking at each one.

Darren: This one.

He picked out a lump of grey fossilized mud that was lumpy and full of holes. While the stone's appearance was clearly quite striking, it was important to know which of its features resonated with Darren.

Author: How is that stone like you?

Darren: It's rotten right through. I'm rotten right through ... I come from a bad family.

Later he was to explain what he meant by this remark about his family:

Darren: My family are all thieves - well, not actually my family, but my cousins are all thieves. They've all been in trouble for stealing. One of them's banged away now for stealing, and there's another one who's a drug pusher ...

At the time his response was a complete shock. I had expected him to be very reticent about himself and his feelings. Instead he had offered a totally damning self portrait. Unfortunately, at that moment, the school bell rang, the door flew open and the Head of Year walked in. Further discussion had to wait.

The interview resumed one week later with an initial question aimed at eliciting information about Darren and his feelings about school:

Author: Can you pick out a stone that shows what you're like in school?

He picked up a small, grey, mottled stone with a very rough texture.

Author: Why have you chosen that one?

Darren: Because it's rough, and I've chosen it because it shows how I mess about in school. I don't like school very much because I'm just not interested.

At this point it seemed important to find something that Darren could find to say that reflected him in a more positive light.

Author: Is there anything that you *are* interested in? What do you like best?

Darren: The thing I'm best at is playing football for X (football team).

He went on to talk about himself on the football field:

Darren: ... one thing about me when I play football - I can get very angry on the pitch. ... If I start a move and someone misses it, for example ... I start the move and get it going and pass the ball, and someone messes it up and just misses it altogether and doesn't score the goal, I get ever so angry.

Author: Can you pick out a stone that shows you when you're angry?

He picked out a medium-sized, smooth stone in vivid shades of red, purple, orange and brown.

Author: Why that one?

Darren: It's got lots of different colours in it. ... The red and orange colours, show what I'm like when I'm playing football cos I have lots of different moods when I'm on the pitch ... Sometimes I get angry when I get fouled ...

He had chosen a stone that was clearly very different from the first in colour and texture, and it was important to gain a sense of what the difference between them meant to him:

Author: Have another look at that first stone that you picked out for yourself at school. What's the difference between them?

Darren: It hasn't got any colour.

Author: Have you got any colour when you're at school?

Darren: No, I haven't. I haven't got any colour at school. ... it's dark grey and it's black –

Author: What does that colour mean?

Darren: Rough work.

Darren now seemed to be construing the physical characteristics of the stone as applying both to himself as a person, and to the quality of his work. Despite Darren's negative portrayal of himself in school, it was important to investigate his hopes and wishes for himself:

Author: If you could be, where would you like to be with your work?

Darren: At the top for everything.

Author: What stops you?

Darren: I like messing about.

This raised an interesting question: why did 'messing about' have a greater payoff for him than overt achievement in school work?

Author: What would you have to do if you were going to be at the top?

Darren: I would have to try harder and not mess about, but the problem is that to be at the top I'd have to do that - to try harder and not mess about.

Author: Why don't you do that?

Darren: It would be boring.

Author: What are the kind of people like who are up there - whose work is right at the top?

Darren: They work hard and they don't mess about.

I asked him to pick out a stone that represented 'good work', and he chose one that was whitish and smooth. It was then possible to use the stones as the two ends of a line representing the quality of work from 'very good' to 'very bad', and also of standards of behaviour:

Author: If you look at yourself in English, where would you put yourself on this line, from very bad to very good?

Darren: Probably just below halfway. (He indicated the appropriate place on the imaginary line.)

Author: Is that for work and behaviour, or just work?

Darren: For work and behaviour.

Author: What about Maths?

Darren: I used to be just under halfway for Maths as well, but I didn't like the teacher then and I asked to change sets, and I like the teacher that I've got now, and my work is much better.

Author: So where is your work now?

Darren: Here. Near the top.

Author: What about your behaviour?

Darren: Near the top as well.

Author: Why do you think that is?

Darren: I like the new Maths teacher.

It seemed to be appropriate at this point to explore the qualities he values in teachers:

Author: Which stone would you choose for the Maths teacher?

Darren: That bright orange stone.

Author: Why that one? There's another orange stone there.

Darren: Because it's smoother. This one is smoother than the others.

Author: Why have you chosen a smoother stone?

Darren: Because he's a better teacher.

Author: What about a stone for the worst teacher?

Darren: Well, the worst teacher ... I've chosen this little kind of lumpy stone 'cos she's really a bit thick. I mean, we have to correct her spellings.

Darren had picked up a small, truly 'lumpy', mottled grey and black stone into which he appeared to be investing considerable meaning:

Author: Anything else about her?

Darren: She's moody as well.

Author: What do you mean?

Darren: She lets some people do things and not others. If some of the girls say: 'Can we go to the toilet?' she lets them go to the toilet, but she doesn't let us.

Like some other pupils with a poor self image Darren construes himself as a misunderstood victim:

Darren: But it's not really fair, because if you're brainy the teachers let you talk a bit and laugh a bit - not a lot, but they let you do it a bit if you're brainy, but they don't let me.

Author: Do you do your homework?

Darren: I don't think we ought to do homework. We spend six hours a day in school and then we're expected to do more work at home. I don't see why I should. Anyway, teachers realise that I'm never going to do it. They realised that I wasn't going to do it when I was in Year 9, so eventually they gave up.

Author: Do they give up on you a lot?

Darren: ... quite a lot.

Later in the interview Darren expressed a fear that, behind the scenes, there is an intention to exclude him from the school permanently:

Darren: Actually they've said that now they're letting it all build up, and when it gets bad enough they're going to get rid of me altogether.

DISCUSSION

Darren had been portrayed as a dour, uncommunicative, inarticulate boy. The significance of the interview technique used here is not that it revealed information about his family that was unknown to the school. Staff at the school were already aware of some of his family history. The significance is more that it enabled Darren to articulate a perception of himself and a construction of what was happening around and to himself that he had not disclosed before. The transcript provides powerful evidence of a 'spoiled' identity (Goffman, 1963). He had constructed a view of himself as 'rotten right through' empirically from his membership of a family that he described as thieves and drug-pushers and from his experiences at school where he perceived staff as waiting to rid themselves of him. At the same time he clearly did want to achieve. There is no claim being made here that 'Talking Stones' is the only way to facilitate the articulation of

feelings of a pupil such as Darren. It may well be that he could have enunciated these feelings in a different way in different circumstances, given the time and encouragement. Darren, however, had not been able to express himself verbally to staff, or had not chosen to do so, up to this point.

As exemplified in this interview, particular features of 'Talking Stones' make it a powerful interview tool. Stones:

POSITIVE FEATURES

- **can break the ice very quickly in a situation where the interviewees may be less than co-operative at first**
- **provoke a great deal of interest in the activity per se**
- **can be moved around to give a focus outside the self which then may feel less intrusive to the interviewee**
- **have size, colour and texture any or all of which may be invested with meaning which is specific to the individual**
- **help to facilitate the flow of thoughts for some teenagers who find it very difficult to articulate their feelings**
- **can represent people, concrete objects or abstract ideas**
- **can be very flexible in their meanings. The same stone can represent a person, action or idea simultaneously**

There are also problematic aspects associated with this type of technique which must not be ignored. It:

NEGATIVE FEATURES

- **is time-consuming**
- **can only be done on an individual basis**
- **can be intrusive; pupils may say more than they would otherwise have been willing to disclose**
- **is ethically questionable unless there is an obvious positive payoff for the interviewee**
- **asking personal questions may be construed as prying into a student's privacy**
- **information gained can be misused**

A school which endeavours to engage with the perspective of a boy such as Darren has to recognise a number of constraints. Firstly, there is a lack of sympathy and ideology of blame for disaffected young people (Fulcher, 1989). Exclusionary

pressures resulting are very strong. In addition, as Garner and Sandow (1995) have noted, some pupils are perceived as undeserving of the right to self-advocacy, or incapable of contributing rationally to decisions about their own lives. Furthermore, some teachers may see pupil self-advocacy as a threat to the existing order. Traditionally the teacher is seen as the one in charge. Pupils may openly verbally challenge teachers' authority as well as the structure and organisation of the school. Disaffection and the kind of behaviour that may arise as a result is often felt as threatening to the teacher. The teacher may feel that he/she cannot fulfil his/her 'proper' duty and that his/her 'proper' role is threatened. Also, time constraints have reduced opportunities to promote self-advocacy. Finally, there is the fact that many teachers, sensitive to the vulnerability of children, may feel reluctant to engage in practice which they do not feel qualified to undertake.

CONCLUSION

Despite the portrayal of Darren as disaffected and unresponsive, 'Talking Stones' enabled him to discuss himself and his concerns in a way which enabled a much greater understanding of his perspective than had been possible prior to this. For him, the social consequences of his own view of himself as 'rotten right through' seem to be very harmful. He appeared to be experiencing "competing values and expectations stemming from internal idiosyncratic processes or from differing family and sub-cultural values" (Ravenette, 1984, p. 20) which was leading him to reject everything related to school. Darren has gained little that is positive from school and is in danger of experiencing only further confirmation of his devalued status.

Using an interview technique such as 'Talking Stones' is clearly no panacea in itself for solving the challenges facing a school which attempts to include a boy such as Darren. However, one way in which it lends itself to becoming a tool in teaching in schools is in the manner in which it can lay bare problematic behaviour. Understanding acts perceived as deviant may not make the act itself any easier to tolerate in the mainstream class. However, it does mean that the behaviour is explicable in the same way as any other. The child is not 'mad' and therefore unintelligible and threatening for this reason, just engaging with life in an alternative mode. And this view of behaviour does at least imply that it is possible, and important, to enter the pupil's reality and hold dialogue.

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