



Considering groups and leadership

'We'll never be the same' Learning with children, parents and communities through ongoing political conflict and trauma: a resource. Rosie Burrows and Bríd Keenan



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GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

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What is a group?

A group is a learning community, that is, people have gathered with a trained leader / leaders to explore issues of concern in order to make changes – to learn something new or do something differently. These concerns and changes may reflect the needs of the individual as well as the group as a whole. Every group is unique, with its own special characteristics, energies and patterns of relationships.

Process and task

The group may meet with a specific goal in mind (to raise money for the pre-school group, to learn a new skill, to explore their experiences of the conflict in relation to their children and so on). This is a task. This tends to reflect the 'what?' and 'why?' of the group.

There is also an equally vital aspect of the group, which is the 'how?' of the group. This is the process of the group: group process can be defined as everything that goes on in the group that is not the content of the task (Houston, 1998). This could be how we speak (or do not speak) to each other, where we sit, if we have remembered to arrange tea and coffee, silences, timekeeping, what we expect of the group leader and of ourselves. Group process is how the people in the group relate to each other and how what they do affects the others in the group.

One of the most important principles of groups is that groups are a miniature world. We establish in a group the same kind of social world we have in our life outside. So everyone comes to the group carrying expectations about the group itself and with how they have learned to be in the world outside.

A group is 'three or more people, connected in space and time who are defined by the environment as a group and / or who define themselves... as "a group". [Group development, therefore, is] the process of self defining, with group dynamics as how the process expresses itself at any given moment' (Gaffney, 2003).

The life of the group

The life of the group illustrates how, over a period of time, a number of people learn how to accommodate to one another's presence, how much each is prepared to influence and be influenced by the others in the group and by the group as a whole – in other words, how much to be a part of the group or apart from the group. How this is negotiated between individuals, subgroups or pairs constitutes the dynamics of the group. At different times people will, out of their awareness, deflect or accept influence or in turn may influence the group or withhold their ability to influence.

The group development process can be seen as the continuous movement around the choice of participation in the action of the group. Often groups are described as going through a number of stages or phases. Different theories give different names to these stages. However, generally speaking, we can say that these stages are not sequential but overlap and loop backwards and forwards as the group develops.

Everyone will have already started to be part of the group even before they arrive. They may have had thoughts about it when they agreed to join the group; they may have talked about it or remembered their experiences in other groups; they may be concerned about not being good enough, smart enough or experienced enough; they may be concerned about how other group members will react to them.

At the beginning the group members identify what they have in common (similar life experiences, similar ideas about smoke / tea breaks, humour et cetera). This is a very important part of group development as it helps to build ground and connection between group members and supports each to feel part of the group.

People begin to feel safe as they identify with others and have shared interests. There is a sense of 'cosiness' and a desire to share. There is clear dependence on the leader at this stage. There will be concerns about being able to trust the leader. This stage is sometimes known as 'forming' or 'confluence'.

The leader's job at this stage is to support the group members to establish more contact with each other, with the task and with the development of similarity. Issues for the group will tend to centre around belonging, membership, identifying with one another, and include questions such as: 'Do I belong?', 'Will I fit in?', 'Can I be myself here and be accepted?'

The next stage is a difficult one and people often leave the group at this point. It is sometimes referred to as the stage or phase of 'conflict' or 'difference'. It is the stage at which people begin to identify their differences. The sense of cosiness goes and conflict emerges directly or indirectly as group members seek to influence others and the leader / facilitator. There may be concerns about who controls the group, who dominates it or adherence to / breaking of the rules. This is also a very necessary part of the developing group.

During this stage, the leader's job is to support differences to emerge in a way that supports contact and the group as a whole. This will enable the members of the group to begin to identify ways of negotiating with each other around issues on which they may disagree. This is also the time when the group may fight with the authority that they had previously given to the leader.

The third stage is when group members start to work closely with each other, hearing and responding to each person's needs and recognising the interdependence of the membership. The group members find support together to achieve what they want and the leader is more of a consultant to them. This stage is sometimes known as 'performing' or 'co-operation'.

The final stage is when the group ends and people go their separate ways. This is often a difficult time for many members. What is important for the group at this time is to recognise that it is important to say goodbye, to really end the time that they have had together. If it has been a significant experience, it will become a frame of reference for approaching new situations. Anxiety over separation involves attempts to both end quickly and to avoid ending. The leader / facilitator needs to support a focus on ending and on evaluation so that as much learning as possible can be integrated and become available to be transferred to other situations. It is the leader's responsibility to recognise the need to end fully and to support the group to do this.

Moving from one stage to another

As the group moves from one stage to another, there will often be one person who will signal by their behaviour that the group is ready to move on. Of course, there will also be those who wish to remain as they are. These forces (for change and for sameness) are present in every group and hold the extremes for the group. In this way it is possible for the others in the group to explore how far and how quickly they want to change. By paying attention to this process, the leader can identify how much and how quickly the group wants to change.

Supporting contact

The group has sometimes been referred to as a human laboratory, the place where people can experiment with how they normally are in relationships – their emotional responses, their imaginations and their physical responses. It is the facilitator's work to notice how the group expresses its process and to support contact.

A group can be understood as a field of relationships or a system. Working with the group as a field means supporting the moment-by-moment contact and communication between those who make up the group and their connection with the group as a whole. Working with the system means working with the structure or the levels contained within the group.

Whether working with the field or the system, the work takes place in the present experience of the members, that is, how they are together at this moment including all their history and ideas about the future.

The group as field and as system

Working with the field


Field theory is used to understand the behaviour of individuals, groups, organisations and whole societies by regarding the context – or field – as composed of forces pushing and / or pulling in various directions. The relative strength of each force of any field determines the characteristics of that particular field as well as the possible / probable actions of any part of that field (Gaffney, 2003).

In working with the field of the group, the facilitator and group are addressing what is important for the group at that moment. Whatever emerges is what is of value for the group. The need arising in the group, emerging from the forces present, form the work. For example, there may be forces for leaving the group and forces for staying. The figure that emerges may be 'fear of being too involved'. It could also have been loss of wages while attending the group or any number of other 'figures' of interest. The figure of interest will also appear at different levels within the group.

The group as a system

There are various levels within a group, sometimes referred to as 'voices present'. These are always present when the group meets but one or more may be emphasised at different times and others remain in the background.

These levels are:

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- individual: the person
 - interpersonal: the person in relationship to others
 - subgroup: small groups within the larger group
 - whole group: all members acting as a group
 - wider group: all members acting as a group plus the leader(s)
 - wider context: the world that the group exists within.

In this very complex arrangement, there are a number of important points for the leader.

- 1 The individual is trying to find a place as a member of the group, to find and give support and at the same time maintain their own boundaries.
- 2 The interpersonal is the relationship created together by two people. This means how I see myself, how I am seen, and how the other person sees him/herself and is seen by me. In this, there is a new understanding of myself.

- Subgroups form around some connection between some group members. A subgroup represents something within the group that may or may not be recognised. When the subgroup is clearly identified, it can be brought into the group. However, if subgroups remain fixed, this will impede the development of the whole group.
- The whole group is defined by how the group sees itself and how it is perceived from the outside (the environment). This will clearly bring the outside into the group. The outside world is always present within the group. It is not possible for people to forget about or leave the world outside. The group time is another way of being in and engaging with the world. However, it is important to recognise the different ways in which the outside appears in the group.

Supporting the group

Emotions

Emotions are neither good nor bad. How we have learned to regard and understand our emotions in the context in which we experienced them shapes our contact with others. We may have learned, for example, that expressing anger is impolite or dangerous, expressing tears and sadness is a sign of weakness, holding back is polite and safer. Emotions are embodied, that is, we carry them in our bodies as well as a mental image of what they are like. We learn about them at a very early age and the sensation that goes with each emotion is lodged in our bodies.

Awareness

What we do is either in or out of our awareness. Separating what I notice (the senses) from what I imagine (the intellect / thinking) or what I feel (the emotions), and exploring how each of these relates when we try to make meaning out of an experience supports the person and the group to stay with their present experience in relation to other people.

Holding for the group

Sometimes we hear people referring to roles within the group (specific parts that people play). Another way to look at this is to examine the group as a complete thing, a unit. Each person in the group holds some aspect of the life of the group and this may change. So for example, a quiet person might be said to hold the unsaid things of the group.

Recognising this reduces the urge to blame (the person does not have to blame him/herself for being quiet or angry, tearful, excited). The individual has his or her own part to play and at the same time is working on behalf of the group. Furthermore, where there is no blame involved or no need to carry the emotion alone, there is greater safety for people to include themselves and to see themselves as part of a larger unit.

Somatic data

We learn with our whole bodies, not just the brain. Our physical body is involved; our brain computes the information, we experience satisfaction or frustration, curiosity, anger, delight or shame, in the process of learning. Furthermore, we learn what we need rather than what we may have expected or been expected to learn. Often when we have forgotten things that we have learned or experienced, our bodies carry the experience / remember. We recognise this holistic view in our language with terms such as 'brass neck', 'broad shoulder', 'bent double', 'red in the face' and 'itchy feet'.

Likewise in our contact with other human beings, research has demonstrated that we respond very little to what is actually said but rather to the whole message conveyed by body and voice. Sometimes our bodies will find a way to indicate that something else is happening, for example, blushing or hesitation.

Themes

The themes of the group are both explicit and implicit. They are the issues that come through the interactions of the group and are picked up. They indicate the concerns of the group. Themes can refer to issues such as safety, being a mother, feeling alone, excitement and so forth.

Conflict

Effective conflict is a support to the development of good relations. It is a clear sense of disagreement about something that is a real issue between us. It requires both parties to be willing to acknowledge and address the issue, if there is to be the possibility of resolution.

Polarities

Our inner and outer world is made up of polarities or opposites. In terms of our inner world, there will be characteristics that we like or do not like about ourselves, aspects of ourselves that are acceptable or unacceptable to ourselves. When we do not accept the full range of humanity in ourselves, we project onto others, that is, we may turn the other person into something to be admired and idealised (unlike me), or to be criticised and denigrated (unlike me).

Groups will contain dominant polarities that are present with the individuals, and indicate both the interest of the group and the extremes that any group will tolerate. Between these, the group members will represent various and different positions. For example, a silent, withdrawn member may represent the holding back of the group, and a member who is willing to experiment may represent what is possible. In between, each person will find a place to be that reflects his or her willingness to engage.

The group leader can notice these and support the group to become more aware, so that there is an increased sense of choice, responsibility and possibility.

The group leader

A leader is present because that is the group's wish. Without the group, there can be no group leader. If the group does not want leadership, there can be no leader. The group, therefore, has expectations of the leader in relation to the job of leading. The group expects the leader to have certain specialist skills or abilities to support the group to do what they need to do. So one group may wish to be taught something specific, whereas another may wish to explore and to solve particular problems.

The leader's job is to pay attention to the needs of the individual and the needs of the group, and to get the task done as well as work with how the process and task interrelate and affect each other. Some people prefer to talk about a group 'facilitator' rather than 'leader'. These words are used to emphasise the relationship between the group and the leader, and the fact that the group has given some authority to the facilitator to support its work.

There are many different styles of group leader and of leading. It is important to identify the most effective way to support the group regardless of your dominant style. An effective group leader will be seeking to be aware of:

the group purpose and task

relevant knowledge to achieve the purpose and task

how they are in the group

the development stage the group is at, the themes, issues and polarities present in order to support the group to identify and fully explore its interest

to recognise how individuals in the group make contact and support the development of 'good' contact

physical responses, energy levels (yawning, fidgeting) and take this as information about what is happening in the group

emotional responses: deciding what to leave to one side and what to respond to depending on the task and stage of the group.

Trauma-focused groups

Herman applies her three-stage model of trauma recovery to considering group work. Although all these stages were present to a greater or lesser extent in the life of the groups we worked with, her stage model provides a useful support for workers in considering the needs of the group. Herman states:



First-stage groups concern themselves primarily with the task of establishing safety. They focus on basic self-care, one day at a time. Second-stage groups concern themselves primarily with the traumatic event. They focus on coming to terms with the past. Third-stage groups concern themselves primarily with reintegrating the survivor into the community of ordinary people. They focus on interpersonal relationships in the present.

Group for safety

Group intervention at this stage is usually most helpful for a number of people who have shared the impact of the same event. In this case being able to share the experience is useful for recovery. It also provides an opportunity for teaching on what to expect in the aftermath of the event and to encourage communities to mobilise support. These educational meetings should also provide for individual follow-up or support. A first-stage group needs to be highly structured and focus on the work of developing strategies for self-care and self-protection. The group should focus on identifying the strengths of the members and offer protection against 'flooding' or being overwhelmed.

Group for remembering and mourning

Here the group acts as a witness and is 'a powerful stimulus for the recovery of traumatic memories'. The second-stage group is a trauma-focused group. Its aim is to uncover the traumatic experience. Each person in the telling of his or her own story evokes new memories for himself or herself and the other group members. By its attentiveness and witnessing, the group supports new understanding and insights into the traumatising experience.

The group requires active leaders who are well prepared, highly committed and have a clear conception of the group task. The leader of the group must be able to hold the boundaries of the group so that others may explore safely. It is emotionally demanding as the leader must model bearing witness and be prepared and able to hear the stories without being overwhelmed. Because of this, co-leadership of this group is advisable. Co-leadership can also model complementarity and co-operative handling of differences.

The boundaries of this group are tightly maintained and the group is closed as soon as membership is established. The group members become very committed to each other and group absences are highly disruptive. To engage in this second-stage work, members must be committed, so careful selection is important. These groups are not to provide an environment for handling interpersonal relationships and the conflict that accompanies this. The trauma-focused group is time-limited and so rituals of celebration and farewell are vital. Much of the integration of the work is done in the ending. Finding appropriate ways for members to give appreciation to each other is extremely important as this supports the movement out into the world with new strength and dignity.

Reconnecting

The third-stage group focuses on the quality of relationships. These groups typically are open-ended and relatively unstructured. Relationships need to be negotiated and the leader encourages difference to emerge. Conflict is essential now, as it is through conflict and resolution that change occurs. Feedback is important. This is a huge challenge to people who once experienced being totally outside human organisation and social contact. Now his / her story joins all the other stories of humanity.

Dangers

Listening to others' experiences of trauma can be highly distressing to group members and workers will need skills in supporting deactivation. One of the most effective ways of doing this has been developed by Peter Levine (1997) – see *Considering trauma and recovery*.

Paulo Freire

The Brazilian participatory educator, Paulo Freire (1973) has influenced our approach to education and working with groups. We believe that an experiential approach is more likely to directly reflect needs and interests than a tutor-led programme, regardless of the degree of informality or informed preparation. Therefore, we have drawn, in particular, on his ideas about:

- participatory education
- dialogue
- codification.

Participatory education

Freire states that traditional approaches to education are like 'banking', in which teachers as experts fill passive learners with deposits of pre-selected knowledge. This is largely a one-way process, a monologue. Participatory education, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of learning from experience in a process of mutual learning in which all teach and all learn.

Learning is not seen as either passive or solely individual. Instead, it is linked with the development of the capacity for critical thinking, engagement with the world around and social problems, awareness that the world can be changed and is not fixed, and building the capacity for collective action to address those problems.

Participatory education is a deeply humanising process as it builds our capacity to experience, know and shape our everyday existence. It involves engaging as a group in a process of discussion, learning, action and critical reflection.

Dialogue

Dialogue is seen as equal or two-way communication, in which both parties are able and willing to be influential as well as to be open to the influence of the other. Real dialogue is possible in contexts where there is an in-depth exploration of social issues and problems that are of real interest and urgency to those experiencing them.

Building trust occurs through dialogue, which begins at the local level in small groups, in the words of the participants. Moreover, 'trust is never finally achieved... even if a group has known each other well. The process of building trust is continuous' (Hope et al, 1984).

The group leader or facilitator is seen as having a special role or responsibility to build the climate wherein people can develop and grow. This involves recognising and accepting the uniqueness of each person and their experience, where it is safe to say what they really think and feel. In this way, there is an opportunity to learn, to rethink opinions and to change. Group methods are not seen as neutral to this task and process.

Codification

Codification refers to a way to represent an important everyday situation or problem by using an image, a picture and language that helps dialogue to take place. For example, a discussion about the important issue of joyriding took place in one group, by shifting from the usual angle of condemnation to a different lens by turning the focus from blame of the individual to the collective and the creation of joyriders and how the community might have some responsibility for this problem.

Codification involves linking everyday events of significance to those concerned to a context, so that more meaning and possibilities for different sorts of action emerge. 'Themes' are another way of using codification. Themes come out of the specific history and circumstances of group members and emerge from discussion. They are used to support processes of humanisation and to challenge processes of dehumanisation.

Dialogue also requires an intense faith in human beings, their power to make and remake, to create and recreate... Nor can dialogue exist without hope. Hope is rooted in our human incompleteness, from which we move out in constant search, a search which can be carried out only in communion with other people... Finally true dialogue cannot exist unless it involves critical thinking, thinking which sees reality as a process, in transformation, thinking which does not separate itself from action (Freire, 1973).



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