ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Safe Space for Change in the Outside World of School: A Framework for Running Therapeutic Groups in Schools

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Abstract

In this paper presentation report presenter (Jill McWilliam) will give a brief overview of the framework developed with school-based facilitators and multi agency teams for use alongside the Morton model of Therapeutic Story groups. The presenter will give a brief summary of case study material to show how a child used the space in a group to express inner pre-occupations and re-engage with learning and his peers and class teacher. The case study will include an example of the profile of the child developed using the evaluation tool (Metaphors Social and Learning Resilience Score) that is then shared with the school as a means of showing changes resulting from the work and next steps with the child in school or with the family.

Introduction

Jill McWilliam is an Educational Psychotherapist who trains and supervises pre and post-graduate colleagues to deliver Therapeutic Story Groups in schools. She uses the framework and the evaluation tool (Metaphors Mapping Social and Learning Resilience) developed by McWilliam Reeves (2006/16) alongside the Therapeutic Story Group Model pioneered by Gill Morton, with whom she continues to work.

The framework referred to in this paper was developed to scaffold the work of therapeutic Story Groups in schools both as a means of support to school based facilitators in developing psychodynamic insight and as an additional tool for qualified Psychodynamic Counsellors and therapists to use in schools with children and staff. The framework includes an evaluation and assessment tool that both provides a measure of outcome and informs ways forward for the child and family.

The work represented here was the work of a team. Creative and questioning colleagues were catalysts for research and development of the framework; lively and resilient children the impetus for continuing the search for meaning and measurement through the use of metaphors in story.

Children, staff and parents of 12 schools were involved in trialing and consolidating the work between 2004 and 2010. Work is ongoing in two local authorities. A team of facilitators have been trained to run therapeutic story groups in schools. The groups are run with pupils whose learning is affected by emotional and social issues. The purpose of the original research ('Mapping Metaphors: For use as a working tool by post graduate colleagues and as a training for entry level non graduates) was to develop - a Framework for use by Educational Psychotherapists based on an existing model. The objective was to explore its use in supporting facilitators in their understanding of the psychodynamic aspect of running story groups and as an assessment tool within the Metaphors Therapeutic Story Group evaluation and assessment process.

The Need – Background

Recent reports have highlighted the needs of children affected by their own, parental or community experience. These have apt titles: 'Hidden from view: The experiences of young carers in England (The Children's society 2013) and 'Hidden in Plain Sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children' (Unicef 2014). The website introduction to the Unicef report states that 'Interpersonal violence – in all its forms – has a grave effect on children: violence undermines children's future potential; damages their physical, psychological and emotional well-being'.

Often hidden or "wallpaper children" as one facilitator described them who, because of their invisibility can fall below the 'Safeguarding Tier 2 - Early help' when if their needs were known they might be seen to be at Tier 3 or even 4. Children who are often affected emotionally and socially, with consequence for social relationships, engagement and motivation to learn, and whose resilience for coping with life in school is reduced. Where there is resilience children may be covering greater need at Tiers 2 or 3. These children are in school, and they are in classrooms.

Statistics from 'Hidden in Plain Sight' [1] suggest that 'the number of children at risk of abuse has soared by 80%

The following list details level of need in particular areas of concern.
- 130,000 live in households with high- risk domestic abuse
- Neglect remains the most common form of child abuse in the UK
- The number of contacts by adults of concerns re neglect have risen by 228%
- Child Abuse – Over 50,000 children identified as needing protection for abuse in the UK
- Over 62,000 children and young people talked to Child Line about abuse last year
- 4500 children talked to Child Line about bullying last year

- For every child identified as needing protection from abuse another 8 are suffering abuse (NSPCC   June18th 2015)

These are some of the children referred for work in story groups.

For these children there is a need for a sense of safety. This is also true for those who teach or care for them in school by professionals. Support to make it possible to contain, carry or cope with the levels of distress being experienced from or through the child.

In this context School management are faced with the demands of resources, time and space, internal and external requirements of outcome and accountability, management and impact of short term input and class teacher

ownership and involvement. Parents, pupils, facilitators and the school have need for careful referral and action with regard to the requirements of statutory safeguarding requirements.

The therapist with the school has the task of enabling the safe holding of the work. The therapist needs to be able to ensure the therapeutic quality of the work with the support of the school and recognize or guard against sabotage within the systems (see fig 1).
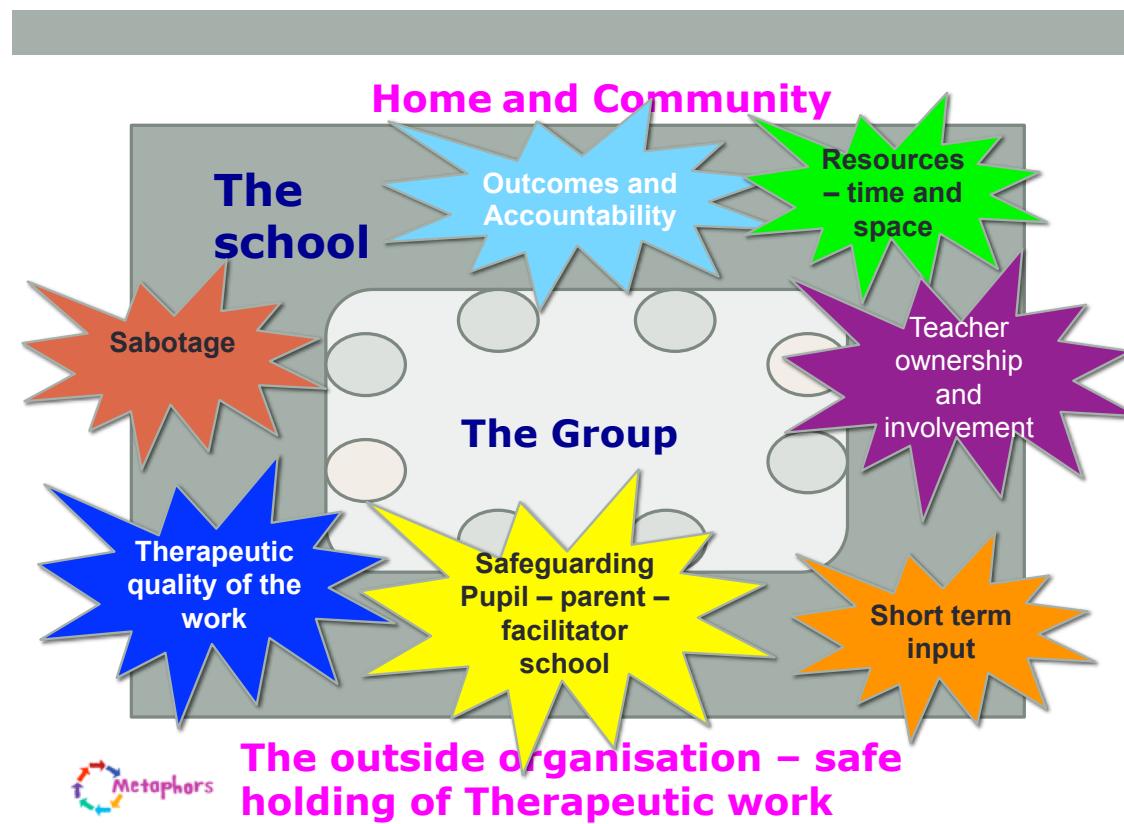

Fig 1 The interface between school, intervention and internal and external demands.
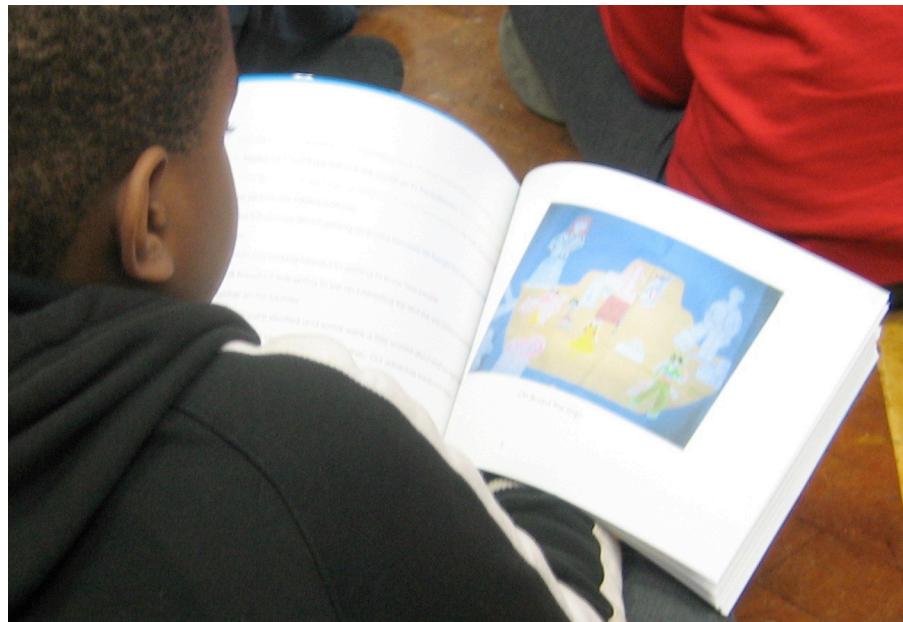
The Therapeutic Story Group

Fig 2 A child with his copy of the Story Book

Each child has their own copy of the collaborative story.

Fig 3 A selection of books.

The Underlying Approach

The underlying approach – the story sessions use the safety of the metaphor to:

- Hold, contain and think about difficult emotions and experience
- Understand and reflect upon pupils' communications and behaviours rather than reacting to the child
- Make space for expression of material which would be too raw in direct form
- Work through issues of bereavement and loss
- Work through beginnings and endings
- Problem solve within the story
- Develop ideas and imagination
- Put feelings into words
- Explore with the pupils their capacity to relate to others in the group

The session with the children contains by

- The use of a consistent uninterrupted room
- Materials and work kept in a safely kept box
- Checking in with each other at start and end of group
- Winnicott Squiggles
- Using the safety of metaphor in art and story idea
- Each session completes a chapter of a story based on getting ready for and travelling on a journey together on a boat to an island and back to base with discoveries on the way. There is space for expression of inner preoccupations through the metaphor of story and art prompted by carefully chosen chapter themes.
- Beginnings and endings of each session and the overall session are thought about across the weeks.
- The children sharing images and story ideas
- They communicate and relate in the group and
- Share in problem solving together.

A collaborative narrative is used, working in the safety of metaphor, through art and story to create a book about a journey on a boat. Children experience

thoughtfulness and containment from two adults, both of whom take part in the process of the group, as they explore inner preoccupations and feelings and begin a process of self-directed change, The facilitators work as a cooperative couple to provide an available 'room in mind',

Case study material

Vignette 1 – Ralph

In the first chapter children are asked to draw themselves and place themselves on the boat.

Ralph drew himself in this way –

Fig 4 Robot boy, getting on the boat

He described a robot who was able to do everything. Beside the robot was a wrench and a spare bolt, as if this were a robot who sometimes needed repair and perhaps needed to have his own tools for the task. As different ideas came up in the story across the weeks the robot character – Robot 2000, took on many functions as they were named by children in the group. As if he needed to be in control. This was the sense of the facilitators who found themselves needing to resist a strong sense of pull toward competition at being 'in charge' of the group.

At the same time the boy had also drawn a very different image of himself.

Fig 5

This very bright and articulate boy also saw himself as a tiny figure. Perhaps reflecting his inner experience as one whom other children did not relate with and who was often alone in school.

When in a later chapter a child talked of bringing a metal dog on to the boat the very strong and quick response was that 'this would be a waste of metal'.

However, this was also a turning point for the pupil who began to listen and engage with the ideas of others in the group.

Post group staff spoke of increased confidence and engagement with peers and school life and he was chosen by his peers to speak in a public debate where his knowledge and skills in articulation were given full rein.

The children join in or connect with each other's stories and can make sensitive reflections. Each session ends with a debriefing by the facilitators, and observations, comments, images, and story ideas are thought about together.

Patterns and themes sometimes emerge across the weeks and build understanding of the child as well as giving opportunity for them to express inner preoccupations.

Vignette 2 – Ajay

Ajay was a year 4 pupil whose story was known within the school. In class he was not available for learning and would often sit with his arms and head on the desk. He was explosive at times but not able to articulate. He was referred to the group to give him space from the busyness of the classroom and the opportunity to express himself in other way. For several weeks he was resistant. His squiggles (Gunter 2007) were heavy and drawn with an expression of anger. Other children were nervous of him. He had good cause to be upset because of life experiences of loss and dislocation, which had continued through much of his early childhood.

In the session where the group imagined an island Ajay drew an image, which contained the scribbled squiggle of earlier time. There was a small item beside the main drawing.

His demeanor was with drawn as it had been for a few weeks but there was a sense of edging out and letting out.

Fig 6 Looking back – something hidden

Fig 7 Island image

Fig 8 Hidden image

With the image the facilitators noticed a hidden image. It appeared to be two figures. One prone and the other, a small head, peeping up beside the prone figure. No words were spoken by Jamaal; though an eye looked up a little at a facilitator from the table as the image was noticed and acknowledged.

In the following week the session was about what might be making a sound coming from inside a cave.

Fig 9 An angry monster

This time the engagement with the task was more overt, less hidden away, and was drawn angrily upon the page. The figure was described as a 'monster' by Ajay. A second pupil, Salaam, who was himself very quiet, an observer in the group, spoke out.

The children and facilitators (Captains) each have their own colour which is used throughout the story. Children are free to use other colours for their images but begin in their own colour.

Ajay imagined a monster with big yellow eyes. Saleem wondered if they were furious eyes.

'It had spikes and they were deadly,' said Ajay.

Captain Books thought that Ajay had described the monster very well.

'It can camouflage with the mountain. If it goes with the mountain it will burn it down and get more powerful,' said Ajay.

Domini thought there was no such thing as a monster.

'Anything is possible in imagination and this is a story.' said Captain Books.

There were sharp red, ugly ugly ugly ugly ugly teeth! And after that battle the giant turned into a monster and lived in a cave.

Through the session Ajay was able to express anger both through his expressions and bodily movement and his resistance to task. He later moved into revealing 'hidden behind a veil' a prone figure. Around this time we had his carer had spoken his sadness at a deep loss and a visit he had made to bear witness to this.

These were steps along a road for Ajay who began to share his ideas in the group. He gave clear answers to evaluation questions. Saying that he had enjoyed sharing his imagination at the right time; The right time for him?

and learning to write and kind of tell stories; He had found a way himself to kind of tell a story which had been 'heard'.

He wanted to tell others - We go to it every Tuesday and sometimes Friday and when we get the book we can show it to them to show them what it is like as proof. The book was also a memory for Ajay of the time he had spent in sessions and the journey he had taken.

When asked how he felt about the group and how he felt about himself he said, ' I feel proud!"

In the initial assessment Ajay had spoken of wanting to be able to read. This was the first step that he took in re-engaging with learning. He was a looked after child who found a safe home. His carer spoke of being able to share the burden of her story in a session with facilitators ' as if I have been in a counseling session'. She was very articulate about the situation and also Ajay's feelings and need in this. It was possible for them to talk together about his situation through conversations at home. A few years later in a chance encounter with them both we were told that he loved books and was sometimes found beneath a book having fallen asleep as he read.

Discussion

Therapeutic Story groups create a space in schools where vulnerable and underachieving pupils are able to use to become empowered learners. For the pupils this is a journey to learning, which gives them a voice and opens up their opportunities to gain social and learning resilience.

For the parents it provides opportunity to see their child in a positive role as a member of a group in which they collaborate to write a book and also to talk about their experience or concerns about their child.

For school, professional groups provide an opportunity to reframe their view of the child and become more empowered in understanding and engaging with the child's emotional and communication needs and in seeing ways forward. It is a requirement of working with groups that facilitators attend CPD days, have supervision of some debrief sessions and attend facilitated peer group supervision sessions.

For the school, staff gain new insights which transfer in other areas of their work in school. Outcomes of the group for the child are shared and used to inform ways forward for the child in meetings with senior managers before and after the group.

Other children also benefit from the increased understanding of staff.

Staff stress is reduced and confidence grows through the support and learning provided by the experiential and theoretical CPD and the opportunity to reflect on their work in the busyness of school.

Professional qualified as counsellors or therapists speak of the value of learning about the tool and also the enjoyment of the work.

Senior managers value the feedback given post group from sessions and the Evaluation. More is said of this below.

The work is based on psychodynamic perspectives with the following being key underlying theories:

- Attachment
- Containment
- Holding
- Group dynamics
- Transference / Counter transference
- Use of metaphor in art and image
- Projection
- Reflection
- Reframing

The relationship with facilitators give opportunity to for 'second chance' learning.

All groups are preceded by a baseline evaluation with the parents, children and class teachers and end with a follow up evaluation session.

The class teacher feed back is 'mapped' giving a visual representation of the child's progress and areas for continued focus. ('The Metaphors Social and Learning Resilience Assessment Tool' developed by the presenter with Michael Reeve 2006) which is integral to the framework.

The framework for safe working in school

We asked the question how can the work in the group be made safe within the micro and macro worlds of school, for the child the school the staff, home and the community.

How would containment be provided inside and outside the group and in the movement between the two?

What would need to be in place in order to include parent(s) and carer(s) in this sense of safety and to make the work effective.

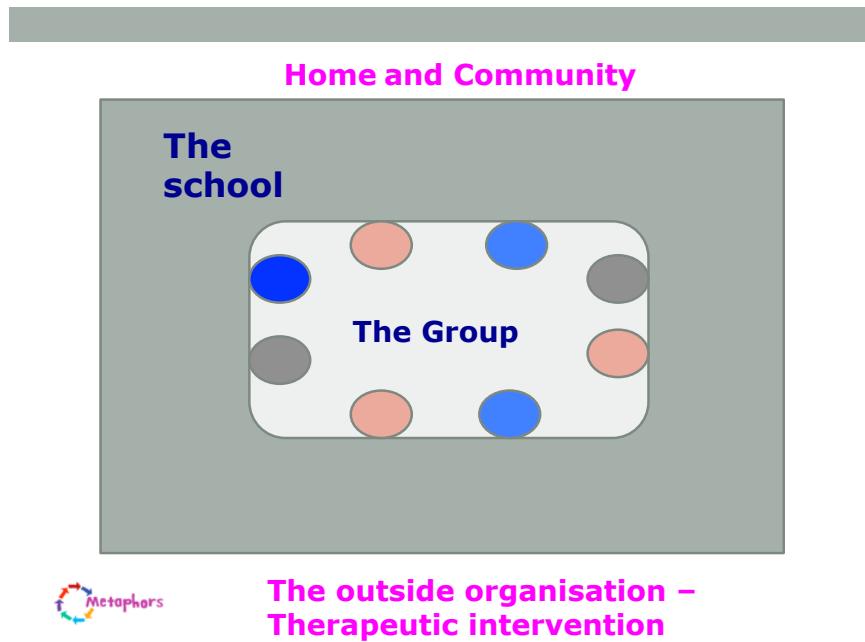What practical steps of procedure and system could be put in place or engaged with?

Fig 10 The group within the school

Use of the framework enables the therapist to engage the school pre, during and post group. An evaluation tool (Metaphors Social and Learning Resilience Score) includes a straightforward way of gathering evidence that gives a holistic picture of the child showing graphically the changes in the child, presented in a way that schools can understand and use.

The diagram below gives an overview of what is in place. In the internal and external worlds around the work.

Key factors

The contracts between school, parent and therapist.

Ongoing CPD and Supervision as a requirement of the work.

Regular and predictable organisation and confidentiality around the work for the child, facilitator, parent, class teachers and the Senior managers in the school. Systems and order – unconscious processes and empathy. Thus

helping to create a safe space for inner change in the outside world of school. Key themes from the micro working of the group are appropriately shared, bringing new perspectives into the classroom.
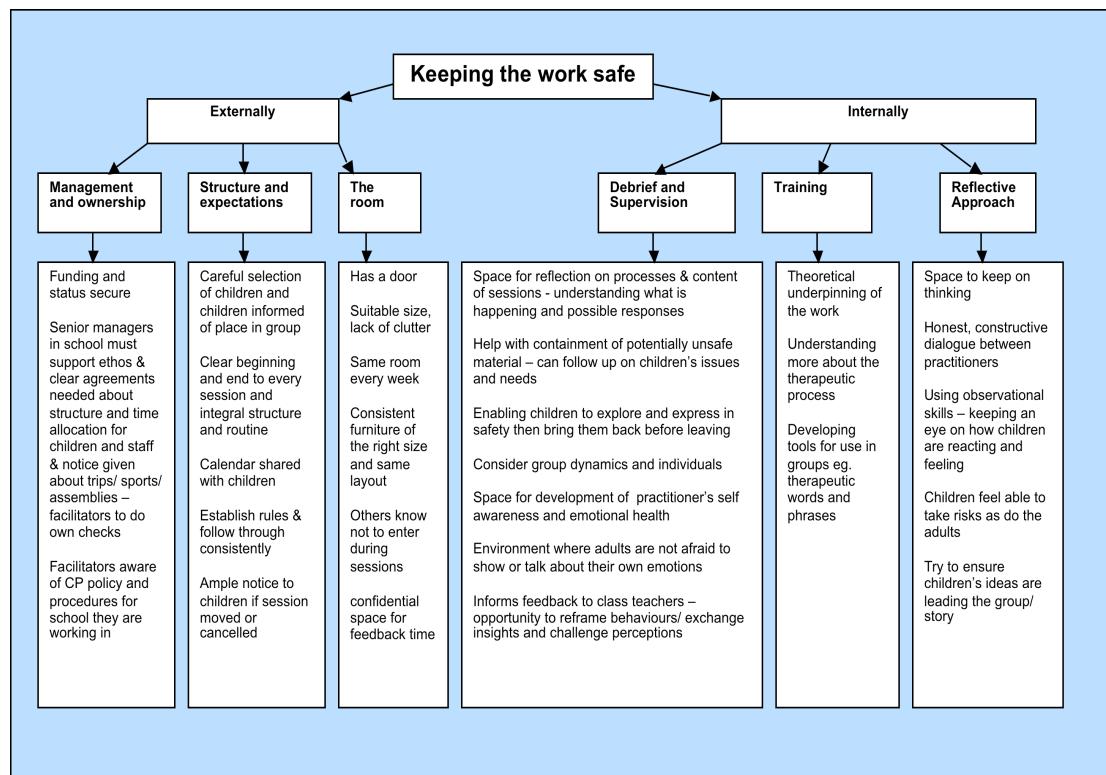

Fig 11 The framework for safe working in school

Conclusion

In this paper we have considered some of the ways in which an intervention coming into the school can meet with requirements upon a school and at the same time maintain the therapeutic quality of the intervention being carried out. The framework has been used successfully as a working tool by post graduate colleagues across a range of modalities as well as providing an entry level training for non graduates. Schools have seen a difference in their children and their staff. Perhaps is a bonus that the work is enjoyable and rewarding for children, parents and facilitators alike and is remembered and held between the covers of a book.

Biography

Jill McWilliam is a qualified teacher and has an MA in Educational Psychotherapy.

In the course of her work with children and teachers as Advisory teacher for Ethnic Minority Achievement with a specialism in Inclusion and additional education needs she had the opportunity to develop an innovative project training and supervising school based; multi agency; and therapeutically trained colleagues to run Therapeutic Story Groups in schools. The frameworks being presented in the workshop were developed in response to the needs to ensure the therapeutic quality of the work in a safe space and provide an evidence base involving children, facilitators, parents and schools.

Affiliations – UKCP – CCAP College of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapies –Vice Chair of Assessment Board

UKCP – Chair of Faculty Psychological Health of Children (FPHC) –

Tutor and Marker on Caspari MA and Advanced Diploma.

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