Group Development – A TA Approach

Teachers spend much of their time within groups – classes, departments, staff teams, extra curricular clubs. Over the past few decades much has been written on how groups develop and there is a general consensus that there are stages through which groups develop. In transactional analysis group development is described in terms of group image. This was an original idea described by Berne (1966), developed further by Clarke, 1998 and Napper & Newton, 2000. The model has also been applied to learning theory by Newton, 2000 and the work of schools, Barrow & Newton 2004 and coaching Newton and Cochrane (2012).

Groups are important to people as they provide arenas through which the need for structure, stimulus (something to do) and recognition are met. And for some being in a group becomes a substantial way in which individuals spend time. Of course, just because groups are important doesn't always mean that life in groups is straightforward or especially productive. Groups can provide opportunities in which individuals play familiar psychological games and play out script-based behaviours. Consequently group development can get stuck and/or dysfunctional. Clearly we see this happen in the close proximity of families, but it is also evident in how particular classes, departments and staff teams can become immobilized. Ideas about group development can provide clues about how groups grow and what to do when they are not successful.

Group Imago

Berne's early work on group imago focused on his clinical context and was informed primarily about how families operate and develop as a group. However, even in his early work – and subsequent writing by others – the basic components of group imago can be readily applied to the work of schools.

The word imago implies more than simply an 'image' of the group. There is a dynamic captured when we think of groups we belong to. It's important to imagine the group beyond a literal seating plan. A group imago is a picture of the group that includes how individuals are 'alive' in the group dynamic. In other words, regardless of where members literally sit/stand or move around in the space of the group, we will have a sense of where they are positioned psychologically with one another.

A group imago diagram comprises of simple symbols. Typically an oval

outline demarcates the boundary of the group, eg. class, department, staff team. A circle denotes the individual composing the group – assuming they are also part of the group – a dark circle to indicate the group leader and other circles to indicate other group members.

A basic group imago.

Group Leader
Individual in the group
Other members of the group
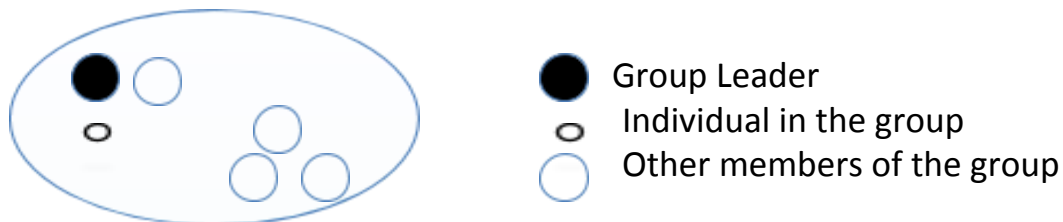
The imago gives a visual guide to how the individual perceives themselves in the group and inter-positioning of self and others. The positioning changes over time and Berne identified a series of reliable rules that describe stages in group development. A useful mnemonic for these stages offered below:

IMAGINE

MOVING

ANGLING

GETTING

ON

Imagine
Before we join a group for the first time we will have a provisional idea of what it will be like. This will be based on previous experience of similar groups, information we have in advance about the group purpose and details about group membership and roles. At the very least we will usually know that someone will be in charge, that we will be there and

so will others. We may be able to differentiate the other members, but may not and simply 'lump' them all into an anonymous single group entity.

In the context of schools there are several ways in which provisional imagoes develop. Teachers often form a view about a class or student based on what they hear beforehand from previous staff. Students can hold an idea about what a particular subject will be like because of their experience previously. Parents may hold a perspective about school generally based on what they encountered twenty years ago.

Supporting this stage of development includes:
- Providing as much information prior to commencing the group about its purpose, composition and structure/timeframe

Moving
In a healthy process group members shift any provisional idea about the group once they join. It is at this point that hopefully individuals shift from what they anticipated to what is actually emerging in the group. There maybe some differentiating of group members at this point – recognizing familiar faces or appreciating those who we were expecting. There may also be a general level of differentiation, ie. noting that there are more women in the group than we first anticipated, or that the space set for the group is different than we assumed.

In the context of a school we would want teachers to take account of the students as they arrive in the new term (as opposed to expecting the group we said goodbye to last July). Students might realize that although their experience of my subject was poor last year that they are open to it being different with me as their teacher. Parents may arrive for a meeting and take notice that there are no blackboards and chalk.

Supporting the group at this stage includes:
- Providing ample time for members to get contact with one another
- Spending time contracting
- Allowing for past-timing and learning group protocols/rituals

Angling
This is a time in the group's development which can be especially prone to difficulty. It is when individuals start to maneuver with others to set up familiar patterns of behaving. This is when game-playing is most likely

to emerge. A key feature at this stage is how individuals seek out to position themselves with the group leader. This may not be with a view to be close to the leader – in fact for some it will be to be regarded as opposed to or distant from the leader. Rivalries, 'favourites' and rebels come into sharper profile as people seek out familiar routes to personal recognition, ie. being the 'clever', 'awkward', 'funny', 'quiet', 'helper' in the group.

Although this is a potentially problematic phase it need not be dysfunctional. If managed effectively and/or if members have sufficient insight and awareness of group process, the stage can attend to meaningful activity rather than be diverted into power plays.

In the context of schools this stage is often experienced where people are fed up with a group, feel frustrated that nothing is happening or being accomplished, where gossip is more important that the purpose of the group, when blame and counter accusations frequent form transactions for group members

Supporting groups at this stage involve

- The role of the leader at this stage is critical. Much depends on whether the leader understands their role as the centre around which members orbit. The leader can inadvertently fuel individual game-playing or avoid this by keeping a clear focus on how they are giving recognition to group members and encouraging recognition within the group.
- Reviewing the contract is a simple and reliable strategy re-focusing the group on purpose.

Getting On
If the group is managed well enough at the previous stage then it is likely that it moves to a higher functioning and effective position. This is where individuals notice and respect each other, where the purpose is clear and there is sense of collective drive. The role of the leader is less prominent and may now be distributed amongst other group members. This is the point at which the group reaches its real potential.

In the school context we might see this type of group emerge as the year unfolds or with Year 11 groups in Autumn term. We may experience this in well established stable departments where there is a balance of long

serving, experienced staff with newcomers with new energy. Little time is wasted on game-playing although there may be a high level of social connection and familiarity.

Supporting the group at this stage involves allowing time for closeness, reflection and incorporating new ideas/members

Group Leadership

Berne maintained that there are three aspects of leadership that exist in any group or organisation. The **responsible** leader is the public face of leadership in the organisation, and the person who fills the role of leader in the organisational structure. The **effective** leader, who makes the actual decisions, may or may not have a role in the organisational structure. They may be in the back room, but they are absolutely critical in making the group function. The **psychological** leader is the one who is most powerful in the private structures of the members and occupies the leadership slot in their internal perspective of the organisation. All three types of leadership may be invested in the same individual, but there are all sorts of combinations....

The **effective leader** can be distinguished by watching the group in action. They are the ones whose questions are most likely to be answered or whose suggestions are most likely to be followed in situations of stress...They are members who attract attention because they are dominant, popular or show a special interest in the group activity...it is often overlooked that the effective leader of the group is usually the experimenter.

The **responsible leader** is the individual who is going to be called to account by higher authority if things go wrong...Since in many organisations the responsible leader is only a front, it is here that dominance, popularity and helpfulness find their usefulness. A person who possesses these qualities may be attractive to the members and thus serve the purposes of the effective leadership.

The **psychological leader** of a group occupies a special position, whether or not they are also the responsible and effective leader. The members demand certain qualities of the psychological leader; omnipotent, omniscient, incorruptible, unseducable, indefatigable and fearless.

Typically in educational contexts the responsible leader is easy to spot – it's the headteacher, head of faculty or year group leader. The only time

where this might be confused is where there is an acting head arrangement. As this becomes established anxiety about who is actually in charge become distractions for staff.

More interestingly is the role of the effective leader in schools. These people get things done and are highly visible and productive. They make things happen and often this role is undertaken by others on the senior leadership team and may not be carried out by the headteacher. If outside agencies are contracting to support the school it is important that they are connected with the effective leader. Similarly, if an initiative is to work it will need the engagement of the effective leaders.

Finally, in schools, it is vital to identify the psychological leader(s). In successful organisations these people will be supporting the general vision and direction of the effective and responsible leadership. Where this is not the case there is likely to be trouble! Rarely is there sufficient room in the same group for two opposing psychological leaders – one has to go, or be willing to comply.

Psychological leadership can often be at the heart of leadership concerns in schools. Sometimes school/departmental leaders do not claim their psychological presence – either through unhelpful humility, or because they think that the job title is sufficient to demand followership.

Psychological leadership is a basic hunger of humans – in almost any group/organisational setting individuals will either look to see who will lead, or take the initiative to do so.