Group dynamics and its impact on social exclusion in children and youth

By Rivkie Ives
Tag Institute for Jewish Social Values

Section 1: Introduction:

For years I have wondered why it was that children often get excluded from group activities by others who seem to be such pleasant individuals. It occurred to me that often young people and adults are engaged in activities they do not even realise they are doing. While those that overtly exclude others are usually doing so intentionally, those that are neglecting others seem to be doing so inadvertently. The neglected child still suffers immensely while he/she has to entertain himself/herself; despite the lack of cruelty that is often part of overt bullying the pain of being lonely is very powerful. I felt that something had to done in order to cultivate more inclusive groups. I began to study group psychology to highlight the dynamics of a group. I also started running experiential, interactive and text based workshops to highlight the negative dynamics of a group while also exposing the participants to the power of cohesive and inclusive groups.

Section 2: A Study in Group Dynamics

Individuals have always strived to be included in groups, even though this may have required that they relinquish parts of their individuality (Forsyth, 2010). Theorists such as Maslow () explain that the need to belong is an essential need of every person. The strength of this need is most noticed when it is not met and children feel most included when they are sought out (Forsyth, 2010). Those included in a group often value their experiences, whereas those excluded may feel invisible, suffer loss of self-esteem and negative moods turn; some even commit suicide. As a teacher I have observed children expend great efforts to be accepted by their classmates. Despite this, many teachers do not see this social need as part of their remit; they often feel that they teach subjects, not children (Ben Avie, 2008). I believe that with awareness and education we can help create inclusive environments for all children.

Debates abound as to whether groups are made up of the sum of its individuals or if a new identity is created (Phoenix, 2007). Asch (1952, cited in Brown, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 2003) explained that much as the molecules of oxygen and hydrogen undergo a chemical change when they become water, individuals change when they become part of a group. Most behaviour exhibited in a group is affected by the setting in which it took place (Forsyth, 2010). Group behaviour is then determined by the interaction of its members in the following formula: its behaviour (b) is equal to the function (f) of the members' personal characteristics (p) and their environment (e) (Forsyth, 2010). This would suggest that to change the behaviour of a group one could manipulate the environment in which it operates.

Upon observing groups, one notices who speaks to whom and who dislikes whom (Forsyth, 2010). Various roles and norms take effect and members have to try and fit in to succeed as a member of the group; those that feel unable to do so leave. Some members are more interdependent and others less so. Leaders of groups need to pay close attention to the dynamics of the members' interaction in order to be knowledgeable enough to assist those that are not accepted within it.

Group cohesiveness can be very beneficial; members feel they belong and can receive invaluable support from their fellow members (Phoenix, 2007). Tremendous productivity can be attained when groups share adversity and a positive esprit de corps (Forsyth, 2010). Yet, on the other hand, groups can be disadvantageous. Buys (1978 cited in Phoenix, 2007, p. 104) stated that "humans would do better without the group". Members may lose their individuality and be swayed by other members; they can behave in ways much more barbaric than they would if they acting independently (Forsyth, 2010; Phoenix, 2007 & Brown, 2002). This suggests that negative behaviour is often best addressed within a group. This would take into account the fact that individuals' awareness of poor behaviour will often be insufficient in standing up against the wishes of group members.

Janis (cited in Forsyth, 2010 & Phoenix, 2007) found that group members often preferred amicability over critical thinking, leading them to develop a "groupthink" mentality. Members may selectively use information to confirm their perspective, even if new evidence arises to the contrary; it has been noted that independent and self-assured members may also revert to the group opinion (Phoenix, 2007). Due to this dynamic groups need mature leaders to manage decisions and counter such behaviour.

Within all groups an in-group out-group dynamic will exist (Forsyth, 2010). In-group members will see differences between themselves and members of their groups but will stereotype members of the out-group as similar to each other (Forsyth 2010; & Brown, 2007; Phoenix 2007 & and Brown, 2002). Individuals with low self-worth tend to be the ones that put down those that are in the out-group (Forsyth, 2010). Studies show the dangers that can occur when an in-group/out-group bias develops. Power struggles may also take effect as members vie for positions of power and argue about the roles, beliefs and norms within the group. This research highlights the dangers of groups and indicates that measures need to be taken to manage them.

The Johnson brothers (2003) also explain that changing one aspect of a group can lead to other changes within the group. This seems to support my aforementioned contention that changing the environment in which a group operates affects change within it. Positive and leader directed contact counteract the negative dynamics of being part of a group (Forsyth, 2010). The style of leadership of each group will also have an effect on the way the group functions (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). Hence, changing leadership may also help to create change within the group.

Section 3: Applying the Study of group Dynamics to the Classroom

Schools are as much a social experience as they are academic (Novick, 2011). Students need to feel that they belong and are accepted as members of their class (Hart & Hodson, 2004); being successful academically will not satisfy their need to belong. For a teacher to effectively teach his/her students, he/she needs to focus on six areas of their development: physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social and emotional (Ben Avie, 2008 & Novick, 2011). Promoting the highest levels of development amongst students helps them achieve high academic results. The higher children scored in their interpersonal relationships the higher they scored on academic scales (Ben Avie, 2008). I have long believed that children's social efficacy is the responsibility of the teachers and have seen the academic success due to teachers' intervention in social aspects of students' lives.

Beth Doll (2003, pg. 113) summarises the integral part that social interactions plays in school life:

Children's peer relations play a pivotal role in school mental health. Children's friendships act both as early warnings of, and preventive interventions for, socioemotional disturbance... The social support that children derive from peers contributes to their ability to cope with life stress, protects them from bullying and peer victimization, and enhances their academic performance.

Effective friendships are formed when the relationship is reciprocal and emerge out successful play between children and their contemporaries. Those successful at creating meaningful relationships will also do well academically and deal better with life's stresses and strains. Failure to aid the full develop of a child will lead to uneven development of the child. Yet, there are teachers who believe that it is their job to teach subjects; how their students' fare socially is not of their concern (Ben Avie, 2008). Poor social development often leads to poor sense of self-worth and low self-regulation leading students to engage in bullying and other unhealthy behaviours. They may also develop poor problem solving skills, find group work challenging and be easily swayed by the behaviour of others. Children who are unsuccessful at fitting in to their class suffer from consequences in their future lives (Forsyth, 2010), including depression, alienation, suicide and violence (Novick, 2011). While members of extracurricular groups may choose to leave when they are unsuccessful at fitting in, this may prove difficult for students. These students will attend school every day knowing they are socially inept.

Recess and play sessions are times when social issues at school come to the fore. During recess there is often minimal adult supervision and making an opportune time for peer interactions. Those that fare successfully at recess tend to be those that are more accepted and have more friends (Doll, 2003). Yet, four percent of children tend not to be accepted by any play partner or classmate; the others are rejected or neglected. Rejected children are actively disliked and told they cannot play with those they would like to play with, while neglected children are passively disliked by not being chosen to play with their classmates. I would categorise the rejected children as those who are bullied by others as they are excluded from the games or groups they wish to play but neglected children are those that are inadvertently excluded and suffering from isolation.

Neglected children often get into conflicts during recess signalling real issues in peer acceptance and struggle to make or maintain friendships, yet rarely get assistance in this matter (Doll, 2003). Even when invited to play, they lack the skills to engage properly and often become disliked and thought of as unresponsive. Whatever friendships they do have are not well established and they often complain of being lonely during recess and resort to physical fighting, and are extremely sensitive to arguing and teasing. Whereas arguments between friends often result in compromise, this is not so with neglected children. Children, like adults, tend to attribute worse judgements on group outsiders, rendering it more difficult for a child playing with a non-friend to resolve conflicting issues (Asher & Renshaw, 1981 cited in Doll, 2003).

Rejection seems to be a part of play even in kindergarten and this exclusion will continue throughout the lives of those rejected if it is not countered (Paley, 1993). Paley found that kindergarteners were already rejecting their classmates from their games. She found that those who were rejected in her class tended to be rejected all through school in ways more extreme with each passing year. Those rejected in play were too sad to pay attention making it very hard to learn. She wondered why teachers offered equal learning opportunities for all students but were not bothered to do the same socially. This mirrors my experience as a mother; children's academic needs are often met while their social needs lie wanting.

While the research cited above was primarily focusing on teachers and students, I feel that these issues are even more prominent in activity camps and youth groups. In these environments

children are expecting to be able to run away from the pressures of the classroom and engage on a social level (http://www.acacamps.org/blog/counselors/prevent-and-stop-bullying-summer). When social interaction becomes difficult and they are unsuccessful they will feel even more lost than in a classroom where they know there will be long stretches of supervised learning time. This is despite the fact that as mentioned above, children could easily leave if they wanted to; as long as they decide to be part of the youth group and/or camp they will suffer the pain of neglect and inadvertent exclusion.

While the study of group dynamics has significantly helped educators to better manage classroom groups and team teach (Forsyth, 2010), it is rarely used to manage social interactions. Teachers need to engage with the group dynamics among students to better assist them both socially and academically. In schools, as in other arenas, larger groups will often splinter into subgroups creating cliques and forming in-group and out-group biases; these groups need to be managed. My experience strongly suggests that intervening and managing group interactions is integral to leading groups of children and young people, whether in a formal or informal setting.

Promoting teachers as leaders of their classes is very powerful. I believe that teachers can create high performance groups by addressing the social aspects of their students' lives. American hockey coach Herb Brooks, was able to drive his team to win over their Russian counterpart, even though they were not as capable by intensifying group cohesiveness (Forsyth, 2010). I also believe, as does Paley, that children are often unaware of the consequences of their behaviour on others. Teachers can alert students to the effects of rejection or neglect of their classmates and foster an inclusive environment.

Section 4: From Theory to Practice

Children suffer from inadvertent exclusion. It is therefore important increase awareness that this happens and how it happens, thereby changing behaviour. One way I have addressed this is engaging the children about the need to be inclusive of their classmates during break time. I started a game of tag and I purposefully left three children out of the game explaining to them that it was just for a few minutes and it was not a punishment. When the game was in full swing I told the three children to enter the game and to see what would transpire. The first child was confident and went straight into the game and was included as soon as he did. The next child was shy and just stood at the side and waited to be invited; the invitation never came. I stopped the game and asked them if they had intentionally excluded this little boy and as I suspected they never did; they just were not paying attention. We discussed how this would have affected the little boy and how he might have felt. I then restarted the game and the last two children were invited to play.

As Forsyth (2010) suggests, children are quick to recognise the need for others to be included once it is pointed out. A little while later I organised a similar activity; this time including all of the members of the Sunday school from ages three and a half until twelve years of age. Interestingly, the first child to invite others into the game was a boy who was part of the game earlier on. One twelve year old boy told me that it was not his business if other children were excluded in the game and unbelievably one teacher said the same.

Using non-human objects in order to cultivate awareness of the impact we have on others was effective. I told a group comprised of eight to ten year olds a story about a herd of sheep that were grazing in the field and realised that the grass on the other side of the fence was richer than the grass they were eating. The only hurdle to overcome was how to get over the fence. We discussed all of the options and then I proceeded to tell the class what they did. Some of the

sheep tried to creep underneath and were not successful, others tried to push against the fence and went back dejected, others tried to climb over and were unsuccessful, others climbed on the back of their sheep mates and got over and yet another group worked together with a few of their friends and managed to move the fence sufficiently to get through.

We further discussed this scenario and all of the options that the sheep had chosen to employ. Only thereafter did we draw parallels to the children's life and the lessons they learned from the experience. We discussed the consequences of stepping on top of others versus working inclusively to reach our goals. I took this one step further and brought in two books from the Sunday school library, one discussing the bully and the other discussing an arrogant classmate. We proceeded to read and discuss the stories and the lessons that they learned from them. We then created skits to show what they had learned from these two interventions.

These interventions seem to have made an impression on the students. As I watched them play together during their break time, I notice that all of the children are engaged in fun activities of their choice. While some played in large groups, others enjoy playing with one or two friends. Older children are on the lookout to help younger ones if the need arises. I have also seen the students take an added interest in helping a child with special needs. These workshops answered Paley's (1993) question as to whether children are aware of the consequences of their behaviour on others. Regrettably they are not, and it is up to the adults in their life to help them become more aware.

The same applies to older children. I ran a workshop for fifteen year old girls who were attending a leadership training course highlighting inadvertent exclusion and the responsibility that as leaders they had to ensure inclusivity of all of their campers or students. I used various fun activities and textual learning to impart these points. For example, I organised an activity in which the girls were divided into smaller groups. One girl did a puzzle independently, four girls played cards and a larger group played another ball game. Two girls were left out and went around the groups to see who would invite them to join. The girls playing ball did invite them. We then had a discussion about the girl doing the puzzle; I asked them what percentage there was that she was playing on her own because she felt excluded from the other games. We agreed that the least percentage was 33%. I emphasised that leaders, teachers, and children are often taking this high percentage of a chance and not attempting to include the child assuming instead that he/she was content to play on his/her own.

Similarly in an academic setting, I assigned my students to work on a task work in pairs. It became apparent that there were an odd number of students that day. Before I even had a chance to address the issue, the odd student was invited to join a group. A few weeks later this class was charged with running the school production. I referred to the workshop that I had run for them months earlier and impressed upon them their responsibility to make all members of the school body feel included. These students outdid themselves in inclusivity; I received feedback from parents who were impressed by the level of attention that they gave to ensure all the whole student body felt important and needed. The head teacher reported that the leaders the show were concerned if even one student was unhappy.

I am currently teaching one subject to the lowest stream of years 9-12, who resented being in the lowest group. I felt that I had to do something to demonstrate their value not only to themselves and to me but to the rest of the group. I started the lesson with a long rope. I asked the students to hold onto the rope when they got it and then throw the rest of it to another student in the group. By the time that all of the students had the rope they had created spider web that was very strong when all of them held onto it but much looser when some of them let go. My message to them was that each of them was integral to the class and that their needs were to be met by all of us. It was after this activity that students with dyslexia and other

reading difficulties proceeded to read fluently. When the social and emotional needs of students are met, they do much better academically (Ben Avie, 2008; Hart & Hodson, 2004).

Novick (2011) mentions a few programmes that were targeting bullying behaviour which involved the parents, as they are also an integral part in creating awareness of the value of inclusion. I have run workshops for young mothers on inadvertent exclusion. These session typically overrun; and often participants go on to expound the importance of this issue to their children's' teachers and head teacher.

The foregoing work was conducted in Britain, but I have also conducted a number of workshops with various age groups of children in two schools in New York. The students were fascinated by the awareness they attained via their participation in the workshop. My experience of these workshops suggests that text based learning should be reserved for older participants, particularly those who are at least training to be teachers and youth leaders. Older workshop participants not only immersed themselves fully into the activities, they enjoyed the text based learning as well. As a specialist in text-based study, I have decided to focus my energies on teachers and youth leaders, both trainee and veteran.

Practical conclusions

Greater attention to group dynamics of children in our care can help address students' need to belong. Groups have positive attributes, although negative ones need managing by sensitive teachers and youth leaders. While break and play time are ripe for enabling friendships, they can be torturous for those who struggle in this area. By serving as role models and creating an inclusive environment, teachers and youth leaders can help manage the social dynamics of their students and participants. Teaching inclusivity is best done in a fun non-threatening way, whereby young people become conscious of inadvertent exclusion. Addressing needs and creating healthy relationships is a powerful way to make all children feel included and considerate of others.

More specifically, my experience suggests that:

- Splintering of groups into subgroups is an automatic consequence of groups with more than 7 members. As this is the case leaders of these groups need to be aware of this and manage the group dynamics.

- When groups splinter, in group and out group bias often develops making those in the out group stereotyped and the butt of negative behaviour by the members of the in group.

- As exclusion is often inadvertent, it requires sensitivity training in order to correct it. Training needs to be experiential and non-threatening, helping leaders and teachers feel what it means to be ostracised and neglected.

- Youth leaders, teachers need to undertake to manage the social and emotional welfare of the children in their care

- Sensitivity training for children ought to be done in groups as this will avoid a "groupthink" mentality

- As most of the exclusion that occurs in groups is inadvertent it is best to run experiential workshops to highlight the dynamics of the group. By this I mean hands on interactive

games and activities that highlight these dynamics. For example; in attempting to highlight the fact that groups normally have leaders and followers I blindfold the members of the group and tell them to get into size order without talking to each other. In order to achieve this successfully one member of the group usually takes charge. We then discuss this phenomenon and think of ways to manage it.

- When running workshops for children, it is important to have other members of staff to manage the behaviour of the group prior to the workshop's onset. This enables the presenter to focus on delivering the workshop and not on controlling the behaviour of the group.

- Text based learning is considered valuable for those in training situations, whereas children find this learning taxing. They are happy to discuss the contents without learning it inside.

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