

DOING SOMETHING WITH OUR LIVES WHEN WE'RE INSIDE

Self-Directive Groupwork in a Youth Custody Centre

BILL BADHAM (ED.), BOB BLATCHFORD,
STEPH MCARTNEY and
MALCOLM NICHOLAS

This paper describes the development of groupwork practice at an open youth custody centre in Nottingham from February 1987 to February 1989. It was started by Nottingham Probation Officers linking with a voluntary sector project, and later developed to include Team Resources for Youth, a project working with young black people. The article gives background to how the work arose, both through previous local initiatives, and through careful planning between February and October 1987. It describes the underlying social action principles and values behind the work, and how these affected practice. It concludes with an evaluation of the work by young men and the agencies involved, and suggests implications for future policy and practice.

Background

A number of factors lay behind the initiative to start groupwork with young men at Lowdham Grange Youth Custody Centre (as from October 1988 called Young Offender Institution). First, a voluntary sector youth project (Nottingham Youth Action) and two probation teams in Nottinghamshire had successfully undertaken groupwork in institutions for young men during the previous three to four years. Second, there was interest among a number of Probation teams in the city in developing the style of working, adopted in these projects, to include all young men at Lowdham Grange who were from Nottingham.

Third, the senior probation officer (SPO) at Lowdham Grange was keen to improve probation worker contact. He told us that there were 22 probation officers involved with 27 young men from Nottingham, and that the service offered was variable and inconsistent, and that probation was often perceived as irrelevant or unhelpful by many of them.

Finally, statistics, published in June 1986, indicated that ten per cent of the probation service workload involved people in youth custody.

Prompted by these factors, an open meeting was called in February 1987. It was agreed there was a need for a better service to young prisoners, and one which they would see as useful and relevant. Groupwork could complement existing contact if it challenged the personal pathology emphasis of traditional casework by addressing the individual within the wider context of social and economic difficulties.

Aims of the proposed groupwork

Arising from the planning meeting, and informed by the previous groupwork experiences the worker team agreed a framework. A positive view of young people which recognised their understanding, ability and skill was seen as essential. In this context, they should be encouraged to define their own issues and take action on them. The workers' stand-point was that difficulties the young prisoners faced were not necessarily the result of 'personal inadequacies'. Social and economic factors, racism and sexism are major forces contributing to young people's problems. Practice should reflect this understanding.

Aims identified included:

- i. to work with young people at Lowdham Grange on their concerns and issues in a group setting;
- ii. to be relevant, accessible, and consistent;
- iii. to develop critical awareness, challenge attitudes and help effect change, including developing anti-sexist and anti-racist practice;
- iv. to question the quality of current probation provision, and to propose improvement;
- v. to raise relevant issues within the institution, arising from practice;
- vi. to include other agencies in the project, given that young people's concerns are not the monopoly of the probation service.

The groupwork approach

The way of working with the young men, arising from the above, was to be as follows:

- i. to work with them in a group setting at their own pace, on the issues they identified as important to them;
 - ii. to work in partnership with them, rather than being seen as 'experts' or 'provider', and doing things for/to them;
-

- iii. to draw on their experience and knowledge;
- iv. to encourage responsibility among them for actions and decisions taken, and to ensure that attendance was voluntary;
- v. to develop anti-racist and anti-sexist practice, and to challenge racism and sexism among the worker team, the group members and the agencies involved;
- vi. to reflect critically on the work being done, through regular planning sessions and occasional review meetings.

Work undertaken (October 1987–January 1989)

STARTING THE GROUPWORK

The SPO arranged access to Lowdham Grange for the worker team, and probation management approved the work. The frequency of meetings and the style of groupwork were negotiated with the young men, and explained to prison staff. The first open meeting took place in October 1987, after eight months of planning.

All those from Nottingham at Lowdham Grange were invited by prior letter and a visit to the four separate 'houses' in the institution. This open access to the group allowed for renewing the links and contacts, in contrast to the usual strict segregation. Between 30 and 40 people came. There were six groupworkers, all white and from probation — two women and four men.

The worker team was explicit about certain constraints. For example, fortnightly meetings were agreed, though initially the young men wanted them to be weekly. Further, the worker group could not, except in emergencies, offer to follow up individual requests for help which would overlap with the field probation officer's role. However, individuals were encouraged to channel criticisms through the SPO. Given the principle of the participants working on their own concerns, the worker team established that it would not become the arbiter in disputes, or controller of resources. Thus, any complaints were fed back to the group as their issues, with which the worker team would offer support, but not take over.

It was established that racism and sexism were contrary to the way of working, and could not be allowed, even if the worker team sometimes felt it awkward or difficult to challenge such attitudes. The worker group resisted expectations of 'leadership', aware that their approach contrasted with the hierarchical structures of the institution. Emphasis was on the young men establishing their own agenda, with the team resourcing the work on the issues that resulted. This involved

working together in small groups to arrive at some consensus, implying co-operation rather than competition. They adapted quickly, but were not always able to shed the habit of calling the workers 'Sir' and 'Miss'! Although sharing a common experience, the young men were not a natural group. Aged between 15 and 21, they were doing different terms of imprisonment and had different levels of confidence and expectations. This variation, combined with the turnover in the group, meant that momentum was sometimes slow. Yet it was recognised that the pace must always be dictated by the participants themselves.

HOW THE PROCESS WORKED

At the first meeting the young men identified important issues that they wanted to cover, and these were recorded on flip charts. Then a timetable for future meetings and topics was agreed. Being over 30 in number, they decided small groups would allow for greater confidence and sharing. They also decided outside speakers would be of use on occasions, but in order to share information rather than to deliver a lecture.

Through planning between sessions, the workers developed a framework for each meeting to help look at the area of concern identified. This was first checked with the participants and changed as necessary.

At the beginning, views about the reactions of prison staff and others within the institution were aired, so that ways of dealing with possible difficulties could be worked out. (Occasionally, this led to meetings of the worker group and prison staff to overcome what were termed 'organisational difficulties'.) At the end of each session space was always given to allow individuals to seek support and advice from each other and the workers.

SOME OF THE ISSUES DISCUSSED

At the young people's suggestion, the third meeting included an outside speaker on welfare rights. The structure of this session set a precedent for the future. Questions to be put to the speaker were worked out in small groups before her arrival. In this way, group members kept a high investment in listening to what she had to say. Time was allowed after she left to check out how the session had gone and to plan for the next one.

Other issues looked at over the following months included housing, parole, legal rights and temporary release from Lowdham Grange. The sessions were dealt with similarly, using outside speakers. At a later stage, the group returned to focus again on the areas of

parole, housing and the benefit changes of April 1988. They worked out both what information they needed and how they thought this information could best be presented. Taking this forward, it was agreed to publish three booklets. Over the summer of 1988, the probation department's information officer and a Nottingham cartoonist (BRICK) helped some of the group to identify and undertake various tasks relating to the production of the booklets. These included editing the information, preparing illustrations and designing front covers. Through the young people's involvement, it was hoped to increase the likelihood that the finished booklets would be in a style that would appeal and be read.

Though the young men tended to focus on worries that they had relating to their release, they also looked at concerns within the institution. While wanting to avoid workers in the group acting as an alternative complaints procedure, an assistant governor saw the value of this forum raising points to do with the functioning of the regime. The principal governor attended one meeting to talk with them directly and answer their questions. This they valued, though they questioned whether any concrete action would follow.

Issues of sexism and racism were often raised in group meetings as relevant to specific areas of discussion. For example, had the young men considered the effects on their female partners of their being in prison, and how did their attitude towards them affect their conduct when in the community? In what ways did the parole process discriminate against black people?

With the involvement of black workers from Spring 1988, the worker team was strengthened in its ability to offer support to black people in the group and ensure the maintaining of a black perspective. The group decided it wanted to look more closely at racism over three or four sessions. There was frank exchange and much honesty, with white people thinking through the effects of language and white education structures upon their own attitudes and outlook towards black people. Black members were prepared to share their own experience within this supportive context. All the group were concerned as to how to take this issue forward within an institution where a governor spoke of a few officers having an 'attitude problem', rather than acknowledging the existence of racism.

Evaluation and implications

REVIEWING THE WORK WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE

Each session was reviewed at the end to ensure the group was running in a way that the members found most useful. At intervals of three months, a whole meeting was used to assess together the relevance of what was covered and how it had been covered. This was done in a variety of ways. For example, questionnaires were used. Twenty six young men were present, and all except one took completion of the questionnaire seriously. Comments were generally very positive. What almost all of them wanted from the group was information, advice and 'help'. They enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere where they were 'being listened to', and responded to. The small groups were seen as a good way of sharing and gaining information. Comments about the role of the workers was favourable. They enjoyed 'being together as a group'. Continuing 'contact with their home probation officer was wanted, though some replies showed that they did not know who he or she was.

Review sessions also allowed workers to assess and feedback their impressions. These were generally very favourable, the manner of work was found stimulating, the motivation of the group members encouraging and the team work supportive. However, the work was acknowledged to be demanding, requiring a considerable degree of commitment to thorough preparation, and consistent practice, and some stubbornness in the face of occasional prison and probation intransigence.

At one review, the sexism experienced by women workers was confronted. The summing up of bad points about the group allowed the workers to be frank about the embarrassment and anger caused by certain looks and remarks, some most unpleasant. Quite a number of the young men approached the women workers later to apologise. They quickly entered into the discussion about sexism and showed sympathy and understanding for the difficult position of women working in an all male institution. This highlighted their willingness to listen and to enter whole-heartedly into what was being discussed.

A criticism voiced by some of the group members was that not all were prepared to get involved and contribute fully: small groups could be dominated by individuals, though this was seen as rare. There was criticism of the organisation of refreshments, which at one time became rather chaotic. The group wanted the workers to lay down laws and take control. Instead, they were asked to look at the issue themselves and work out their own agreed system. This was done by first brainstorming the question 'what is the current problem with refreshments?'

In small groups they examined why the problems existed and how they could be resolved. Their findings were written on flip charts and the results drawn together in the large group to form the basis of a new system. There were no problems subsequently, and everyone stuck to the rules that they had made themselves.

REVIEWING THE WORK WITHIN THE AGENCIES

There were four open review meetings, involving the groupworkers and other interested practitioners and management from Lowdham Grange, Nottingham Probation and more recently the Youth Service. It was through external publicity that Team Resources for Youth (a black youth work project within the Youth Service) became involved. These meetings, the circulation of the minutes, writing up the work, and going to probation field teams, were the means to encourage wider discussion of the issues raised by the groupwork practice, to ensure the group would continue through recruitment of new workers, and to avoid its isolation from mainstream probation and youth work.

These measures have had some success. For example, the inter-agency and anti-racist practices were developed through the partnership with Team Resources for Youth. Extending the worker team in this way helped to bring important different perspectives on issues raised and tackled.

It also allowed access to a local prison for a youth organisation that already had contact with some of the young men there. To enable the planning and preparation, an ex-groupworker agreed to act as consultant. Another undertook a development role, with the aim of promoting the work within the departments. However, these successful developments were somewhat undermined by the reluctance of some probation teams in Nottingham to look at the issues raised by the groupwork practice. Further, probation management seemed remote to the groupworkers, and more content to criticise from the sidelines than lend positive support. For example, when information was requested, and therefore sent, it was not acknowledged, or acted upon. This ambivalence raised questions about probation management's commitment to the inter-agency aspect and the development of anti-racist practice within the project. Team Resources for Youth and its management within the Youth Service were increasingly concerned that it was being 'used' by probation as a black resource to compensate for the lack of black probation workers, and the lack of a positive recruitment drive to appoint them.

For the probation field teams fully involved (about half of those in the city), the groupwork was seen to complement individual probation

contact with individual young offenders at Lowdham Grange. Statutory responsibilities for throughcare were seen as needing both components. Yet, probation management spoke of duplication and questioned the use of resources (six workers for 30 young men). In turn, this undermined the position with prison staff. When there were significantly fewer young men at Lowdham Grange, there was pressure to fulfil workshop production quotas. Prison management then told probation what its job was: 'Your group still represents work in essence *extra* to the statutory probation links'. Probation management, without consulting Team Resources for Youth, commended and supported this view. The group was closed, though a stay of execution was granted for a fortnight on realising members of the Parole Board from London were due to attend the next session. After 18 months of fortnightly contact, the groupwork ended in January 1989, with little opposition from probation management, but much anxiety and regret from the young men.

Conclusion and way forward

After 18 months of groupwork, it seemed that the initial aims, as set out in the beginning of this article, were being achieved. The response of the young men was encouraging. They showed great commitment in identifying their concerns, looking at why these existed, and how action could be taken. The worker team gained experience and developed a coherent practice, incorporating an inter-agency and anti-racist perspective. The groupwork revealed wide discrepancies amongst probation officers in the standard of their practice. It suggested self-directive groupwork should form a greater part of throughcare policy. It seemed to offer a model for Nottinghamshire and other probation departments to increase the quality and quantity of contact with young offenders making effective use of resources. It highlighted the need of all probation workers not to let prisoners out of sight be also out of mind. It underlined the need to be conscious of, and involved in, the broader concerns that go beyond individualised problems.

It is hoped the closure of the groupwork initiative is only temporary. There is significant support from the Youth Service and Team Resources for Youth, as well as from many field probation workers and their seniors, for establishing self-directive groupwork as a central component of contact with prisoners. Many issues remain undecided. How would such a model transfer to prisoners on release? Should it not apply to other institutions? If so, how should this be resourced? What encouragement will be given to the active seeking of partnership between probation and local youth workers? Can such

creative practice exist under the shadow of further punitive criminal justice legislation, threatening electronic surveillance, tagging and tracking of offenders?

Whatever the unresolved issues, it is hoped that this inter-agency model of self-directive groupwork with prisoners will influence future policy and practice. The groupwork at Lowdham has demonstrated the group members' commitment and enthusiasm to this way of working. They showed the ability to take responsibility and control of their own group, to set their own limits and rules, to identify their concerns and work constructively at resolving them.

One young man said on leaving the group that it had helped 'us to be able to talk about ourselves as individuals; it made you feel as though you *can* do something with your life while you are inside'.

Acknowledgement

This article was informed by all the worker team, in consultation with the young men from Nottingham involved in the groupwork at Lowdham Grange Youth Custody Centre.