

**Collaborative group work in the primary classroom: a
psychoanalytically informed exploration.**

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Abstract

Collaborative group work in the primary classroom is considered to hold academic and social benefits for pupils, in providing opportunities for them to develop thinking through interaction with others. It is widely recognised, however, that teachers find it challenging to incorporate group work into classroom practice because of the difficulties pupils often experience with this form of learning. The aim of this research is to explore psychoanalytic theory as a way of thinking about the emotions, both conscious and unconscious, that might circulate in the group and affect the ability of group members to achieve the explicit task that has been set. I present four case studies of group work, involving children in a Year 5 class; each study illuminates aspects of the emotional difficulty children might experience, for example, the tensions of belonging to a group, the frustrations of learning with others and the anxieties that might be stirred. I argue that teachers and educational leaders would benefit from attending to the emotional significance of group learning, rather than invest in the 'fantasy' that suggests affect and cognition can be kept separate in encounters with learning and with others.

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I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Reflective statement

If we speak of development as a progression from immaturity to maturity, as a property of the individual, we are apt to miss the fact of development as our human condition. We are likely to forget that all of us are subject to the radical uncertainty of being with others in common and uncommon history and, this being with other beings makes development uneven and uncertain. (Britzman, 2007, p1)

A summary of my learning over the whole EdD

I have undertaken my doctorate in the context of being a class teacher in an inner-city primary school and when I started my studies I was keen to understand more about collaborative group work in the classroom. Prior to the EdD I had been involved with a research project, working with a team of academics in trialling a series of collaborative tasks with my class, to understand how group work potentially improves children's reasoning. The team encouraged me to develop my own interest in research and so when I applied for the EdD, I set out a proposal to investigate the affordances and constraints of collaborative learning, with a focus on children's talk. I wanted to know the strategies and techniques that the teacher or children could put in place to fulfil the potential of group work in the classroom. I thought research would bring greater certainty to how I could achieve this.

Although I set out on this course to study collaborative group work, the first few years of my EdD were focused on considering collaborative learning in the context of teachers' professional development, in particular, reflecting on one's practice with colleagues. It was not until conducting research for the Institution-Focused Study that I returned to thinking about collaborative learning in the context of children. By the time I reached the thesis stage, I had moved away from the socio-cultural theory that influenced my thinking at the start of the EdD and became focused on psychoanalytic theory.

A summary of my learning could be described in terms of changes in my understanding about the theories of collaborative learning. However, Deborah

Britzman (quoted at the outset) argues that what we overlook in professional learning is the issue of education itself. Through the EdD I was back in the position of learner, in a classroom situation, with the expectation of producing evidence of learning. Britzman describes how in this position we potentially encounter situations that repeat the old conflicts, anxieties and desires of when we were pupils back in school. According to her, learning is not a rational, linear process, since it involves the emotions of our 'human condition', for example, looking for approval and acknowledgment to give us significance of being. Reflecting on my time on the EdD, I can recognise how learning alongside others has been marked by times of anxiety, doubt and uncertainty. I have been unsettled by my peers, in making comparisons with their progress, but their support has also spurred me on and given me comfort. A summary of learning is as much about my dependence on the EdD group and separation from it, as it is about what I have actually learnt.

Overview of the elements of the course

What follows is a brief outline of the assignments I completed, starting with the taught part of the course:

- For my first assignment I looked at reflection within the broader context of classroom-focused, collaborative professional learning. I examined a government policy document that presents teachers with the autonomy and responsibility for taking ownership of their own professional development and I then considered the implications for this when set within a frame of 'new professionalism', where the discourse is that of performance management and school improvement.
- For 'Methods of Enquiry 1' I designed a qualitative research study using 'video reflection' as a tool for developing teachers' understanding of the teaching and learning of primary mathematics. Drawing on the concept of 'professional vision', the interest for me was whether there is a difference between experienced and novice teachers in the way they reflect on video evidence of mathematics lessons and the features that they notice. My underlying question was whether experience serves to expand or restrict a teacher's vision.

- In the following assignment for the specialism course, I considered the act of reflection from the perspective of post-structural and psychoanalytic theory. I challenged the assumption that reflection leads to the empowerment of teachers and greater understanding of teaching and learning. Applying a different reading I came to see reflection as the construction of a deceptive narrative in which teachers present a unified, coherent version of their experience to avoid confronting uncertainty and the fragmentation of self.
- The basis of my final assignment for 'Methods of Enquiry 2' was a descriptive account of one teacher's professional vision of collaborative group work in mathematics, as constructed through video-reflection. The transcripts of these reflective discussions formed the data for analysis, through which I developed a coding system to identify how the teacher talked about group-work from the video-evidence.

It can be seen that I started out thinking that collaboration between teachers was unproblematic in itself, albeit affected by discourses of 'performativity' and 'accountability'. I imagined that the act of reflection was an explicit, rational and conscious act, even when examining video extracts of one's own practice (as with my second assignment). It was only when I embarked on the specialist course, when I was introduced to psychoanalytic theory that I began to imagine there might be an unconscious dynamic to the act of reflection that influenced what could or should be said. In many ways introduction to psychoanalytic theory was a significant moment in my studies, but initially there was some resistance on my part to these new ideas. I struggled to deal with the way in which it unseated the motives and purposes of education, as well as the certainty of knowing. In my final assignment I therefore returned to the idea that there was a direct link between the act of reflection and improvements in teaching practice.

Following on from the taught courses, I conducted a small-scale piece of research for my Institution-Focused Study. In this research I explored the difficulties that children

experience during collaborative group work in mathematics. I used observation and interview data from a Year 5 class in my school to construct a 'realistic' version of group work that took account of emotional and identificatory processes in working with others; I compared this reading of the data with a socio-cultural one that focused on the quality of talk. I argued that markers of 'exploratory talk' present and 'idealised' version of group work and prevent us from being able to think about group work processes in a more nuanced way,.

This research represented an initial step into exploring psychoanalytic theory. It is where I began to read theorists like Bion and Klein, both of whom remained strong theoretical influences for my thesis. It was also where I learnt about psychosocial research methods that take account of dynamic unconscious processes between research participants and the researcher. Part of my study included unstructured group interviews; the data that I generated through these interviews, and observations, excited me and gave me the confidence to continue with similar research for my thesis.

I am aware that during my IFS research I clung onto the familiar socio-cultural theory that so influenced my thinking at the early stages of the EdD, even though I wanted to acknowledge unconscious processes. I tried to make psychoanalytic theory about groups sit alongside notions of 'exploratory talk'. When it came to my thesis I realised that I needed let go of socio-cultural theory, but this was no easy process. It had been so much a part of my professional development as a teacher and in many ways represented certainty of knowledge and legitimisation for collaborative learning. Separation from this way of thinking was like letting go of a well-worn comfort blanket.

During my IFS I understood that there were 'idealised' discourses around group work, but I had yet to make the link with the psychoanalytic notion of 'fantasy'. Appreciating the connection between 'fantasy' and unconscious anxiety and defence mechanisms was a significant step in terms of developing my research for the thesis. I continued with a similar theoretical framework from the IFS but it felt as if I was

now beginning to piece together 'bits' of theory towards some semblance of integration. I do not want to suggest that I have 'arrived' in terms of my understanding of psychoanalytic theory, although I do feel as if there has been progression from my IFS.

Contributions to professional development and knowledge

When I embarked on this EdD, I always imagined that my progress through the course would be marked by a march towards certainty and knowledge. Perhaps there was a part of me that also imagined my studies would make me a better teacher. My experience, however, is that six years later I stand in a place of greater uncertainty and conflict. Through studying for the EdD I did not find answers about collaborative learning, only more questions. Learning for me de-familiarised my suppositions. When I started the course I held that group work was a purely cognitive and social activity; further into my studies and my position changed to understanding it primarily as an emotional experience. I originally thought I could define the boundaries of the group, say in terms of the task, the duration of the activity, the individuals involved; I thought manipulation of such aspects could improve the quality of collaboration. By the end of the EdD, I understood that boundaries within and beyond the group are blurred and indeterminate, for example, boundaries between the individual and the group and boundaries between the present moment and past experiences. To imagine that as the teacher I can control what happens in the group now feels an impossible task.

I believe that holding together positive and negative aspects of collaborative learning enables me to continue using it as a form of learning in the classroom. When group work become messy and difficult, I now have a way of being able to think about the problems, rather than become disappointed with my failure as a teacher and the failure of the children to fulfil my expectations. Here is the view that embracing uncertainty makes genuine thinking more possible. In my work with my colleagues at school and the wider profession, I take with me what I have learnt through my research studies: that collaborative learning is not an easy process, since there is an emotional dynamic to being in groups, often at an unconscious level. This is not just

theoretical knowledge, but lived experience through being back in the position of a learner. This way of thinking about learning has radically changed the way I see events in the classroom and I hope that my research opens up this view to others.

Chapter One

Introduction

Collaborative group work can sound straight-forward. Children are put into small groups, typically with about four to six group members, with the expectation that they work together on a task to produce a joint outcome. Certainly the rationale for using this form of learning is compelling. One of the earliest and most influential studies into the potential of group work in schools was that undertaken by Barnes and Todd (1977). They painted a stirring image of what children are capable of, when left to work in a small group without the teacher:

Members were free to shift the topic, to try out new formulations and to explore alternatives, since none of the questions asked concealed positional claims to impose a frame on the discussion – to guide its direction or to judge the relevance of answers. The members of the group cast their bread upon the waters. They were each other's resources and most of the utterances were contributions to thinking. (p. 126)

The image of group work that is created here is of the freedom to learn without the control of the teacher; group members throw their ideas into the collective pool without fear of judgement; thinking develops through the negotiation and exploration of these ideas. The statement that group members become 'each other's resource' suggests that pupils willingly provide what others need. This positive picture of group work has since been reinforced by other socio-cultural studies that also state the cognitive and social benefits of collaborative learning. Group work has been credited, for example, with increasing attainment levels (e.g. Shayer and Adey, 2002), improving reasoning (e.g. Mercer et al, 2004) and developing more equitable learning relationships (e.g. Boaler, 2008).

The prevailing picture from the classroom, however, is that group work is far from straight-forward and that it does not always deliver on the potential cognitive and social benefits. Three decades ago, Galton et al. (1980) and Bennett and Cass (1989) were reporting on the prevalence of uncooperative, unproductive and off-task behaviour in groups. More recently, there still appears to be a lack of productive

interactions during group work, even when pupils are set a joint task (e.g. Blatchford, Kutnick et al., 2003; Galton and Hargreaves, 2009; Alexander, 2008; Kumpulainen and Wray, 2002). Although group work can be a deeply enjoyable way of learning, often it is a source of aggravation for individual members, leading to feelings of discouragement (Barron, 2003). Teachers' concerns about group work include the loss of control, increased disruption and off-task behaviour (Cohen & Intilli, 1981).

It is acknowledged that there are many contextual factors that affect the success of group work; for example, the task, group composition and classroom ethos (see Howe and Mercer, 2007, for a review of this literature). In order to measure the impact of any one of these factors, group work is often defined in binary terms as say, 'productive' or 'unproductive', 'on task' or 'off task'. For instance, if an indicator of productivity is the quality of talk (e.g. Lyle, 1996) then 'chatting' during group time is cast in opposition to learning. As such, doubts are raised about the purpose of collaborative groups in some classrooms, as shown in this statement: *'left to their own devices to 'discuss' something, or talk together, much classroom based talk amongst children may be of little educational value'* (Long et al., 2011, p.196).

It is recognised that some teachers might require professional development to improve the quality of group work and fulfil its potential in the classroom (Blatchford et al., 2003) and there are a number of government policies¹ and research-based programmes² that aim to develop teachers' knowledge and skills. I was involved at the research stage with one of these programmes; my role was to trial the group tasks at the point when the team were developing the lessons. I received valuable professional development about group learning through this experience, although it has not solved all my problems with group work. I do not typically see a group of children all engaged with the task, asking each other questions, listening to and challenging each other and there have been many times when I have found collaborative work too difficult to persist with in the classroom. Where groups

¹ For example QCA/DfES (2003), *Speaking, Listening, Learning: working with children in KS1 and 2*; DfES (2003), *Excellence and Enjoyment*.

² For example, *'Thinking Together'*, Dawes et al, 2000; *'Let's Think'*, Adey et al, 2001; *'The SPRinG handbook'*, Baines et al., 2009; *'Dialogic Teaching'*, Alexander, 2004

experience difficulties there is the expectation that as the teacher I will be the one to sort out and help resolve their problems. In those moments I find it hard to focus and concentrate on my role; I forget the theory and what I want to enact reacting instead from the emotions stirred within me, like shame, anger and anxiety. When children are arguing in a group, I often intervene immediately, rather than allowing space for them to resolve the difficulties on their own; if they need help with the task, I sometimes find myself instructing them to watch me as I do/model it for them. At times the tension can be too much to bear and so I step in to try and remove the difficulties – either that or I walk away from the group. I have read books on collaborative learning, attended courses, observed other professionals and yet there is something in excess of this knowledge and experience that makes group work unpredictable, uncontrollable and uncertain.

I not only draw on my own experience of group work but also that of other teachers I have worked with. Following on from my involvement with the research team, I took on a role mentoring teachers across different schools, helping them to incorporate collaborative learning into their practice. The majority of these teachers readily embraced the idea of group work; some experienced success and made group work a regular feature of their classroom practice, but many struggled to continue with this way of teaching when they came across problems. There did not appear to be a middle ground where they were prepared to work through the difficulties. It either was a 'good' experience or a 'bad' one. If practical solutions or correct techniques did not help find success, then it appeared that teachers would rather not stay with the problems or persist with working through the conflicts. We exhort pupils to take risks, learn from their mistakes and not give up, yet we can struggle to do likewise – a case perhaps of 'do as I say and not as I do'.

I understand that group work can be a satisfying experience and there have been some occasions when I have observed children work together and it felt like it fitted with the description of Barnes and Todd at the outset to this chapter. The motivation for my research, however, is an attempt to understand the difficulties of group work, for it strikes me that as teachers, we find it much harder to talk about the problems

than we do the successes. Binary forms of thinking that position group work as 'productive' or 'unproductive', 'on task' or 'off task' can lead us to think that group work has failed (or we have failed) when, say, the children focus on issues other than the learning, or one individual takes control, or an aggressive argument breaks out.

This research takes a more nuanced view of what happens when groups of children work together, one that captures and explores some of the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities. I want to consider whether an expectation that group work should be a harmonious, mutual and straight-forward process is in fact fantasy. I want to explore how an investment in this fantasy leads teachers (and children) to defend against more troubling thoughts about learning with others and how that might limit what can be known. I will expand upon this idea in the next section.

Fantasies (and fears)

A number of researchers would argue that views of teaching and learning are imbued with fantasy and that these imaginings are a way to help defend against difficult, painful, anxious or aggressive thoughts. Deborah Britzman (2009) is one such researcher. Britzman writes about how the fantasy that is prevalent in schools is the certainty, assurance and confidence around views of education. Pedagogy and practices are predicated on notions like the altruism, neutrality and objectivity of education, the status of the teacher, the certainty of knowledge and the legitimisation of measures. Subjectivity and affect need to be kept out, so as not to endanger this confidence. For example, if a teacher is struggling in the classroom, colleagues and management might rush in with tips, advice and programmes of support, all aimed at foreclosing the difficulties and uncertainties that he/she might be experiencing. Another example is the need to believe in the altruistic motives of the teacher, because we feel uncomfortable about classroom relationships if we consider the possibility that there are narcissistic reasons for wanting to be a teacher. But what if narcissism is part of some teachers' anxieties about group work? When pupils support each other's learning might the teacher unconsciously fear that he/she is dispensable?

Other researchers have described the ways in which fantasy helps us to defend against anxiety and uncertainty in the classroom, holding out the promise of an experience of teaching and learning without conflict. Shaw (1995) uses the example of a class of screaming or unwilling children – an experience that should terrify us and send us running from the classroom. As a way of ‘coping’, Shaw suggests, the teacher resorts to some form of fantasy of omnipotence, one that positions power as something magical. A word from the teacher, for example, and it is imagined that perfect order can be resumed. This ‘magical’ element to our fantasies reduces the requirement to have to engage in thinking difficult thoughts – thoughts about the instability of power, for example. Bibby (2010) relates the idea of fantasy to how the primary task of the school is perceived. A primary task of the school might be understood to be the transmission of knowledge, but this understanding about the teacher’s objective task can become bound up with fantasy. For example, teachers and parents might talk about a child ‘just knowing’ something, whereby it is imagined that the child has an innate capacity to learn a particular subject and therefore need not make any effort. In relation to group work, do we hold fantasies around the easy transfer of knowledge between pupils through the idea that group members are ‘each other’s resource’?

Bibby describes how defence mechanisms exist within the very structure of organisations – they are not just an individual response. She draws on the research of Isabel Menzies-Lyth (1960), who showed how defence mechanisms are built into the cultures of organisations to mitigate anxieties, or sometimes capitalise upon them. Bibby provides the example of the way knowledge is codified into a formal curriculum with assessment targets, to enable us to behave as if knowledge were certain, fixed and measurable:

Anxieties that knowledge might be shifting and uncertain, that coming to know might be a stuttering process rather than a clean, one-off event, not knowing what or how we know anything, fears of forgetting, not knowing, and the sense that teaching’s relation to learning might be problematic, are all alleviated by the presence of the curriculum and assessment procedures (Bibby, 2010, p.27).

What is being defended against are terrifying thoughts about the hatred of learning, failures in the learning process and refusals to know.

Tied up with our fantasies about teaching and learning are idealised images, say of what makes a 'good' teacher or pupil. Shaw (1995) describes how the ideal image of a teacher in many ways matches what the ideal parent would be – never getting cross with the child, keeping control all the time, introducing learning and not having to struggle to achieve this. The image of the ideal pupil meanwhile, is that of a hard-working, well-behaved and successful child. In the case of group work, perhaps our image of the ideal pupil is one who is willing to help and explain the learning to others. Given that the more 'capable peer' is credited with the same role as adult (parent) in gradually guiding the learner to achieve a task independently (Vygotsky, 1978), then seemingly this ideal pupil also possesses the maternal qualities of patience, control, nurturance and the ability to introduce learning effortlessly.

The fantasies of the ideal teacher and pupil can be seen as defensive strategies, ways of repressing and denying more aggressive and terrifying thoughts. But ideas about teaching and learning that are premised on fantasy also cause anxiety. Britzman relates the story of a male teacher who was experiencing anxiety attacks in the classroom. She asked him to relate what sort of teacher he thought he should be:

I learn that the teacher is an authoritative figure who always knows what to do, what to say, and so never experiences conflict, headaches, nausea, or anxiety. Oddly, the teacher is the most perfect narcissist. This phantom figure never experiences awkward moments because the teacher knows all that there is to know about teaching before stepping into the class. The teacher is so perfect that he doesn't need to use any teaching techniques and in this phantasy the students soak up the teacher's superb knowledge as well as admire his absolute command. (2009, p. 142)

This teacher's image of his role caused him on-going disappointment and misery when he failed to live up to his ideal. This fantasy served only to chastise him for the uncertainty that he felt. As teachers, we can persecute ourselves for failing to meet the ideal. Feelings of shame, guilt and disappointment around not being perfect are

continual bedfellows in the lives of many teachers; rather than recognise that 'the idealised role of the teacher has failed', the understanding too often is that 'I have failed' (Bibby, 2010). The precarious nature of fantasy is such that it can both serve to defend against anxiety and cause anxiety. When a teacher's omnipotence, for example, is fantasised as having a magical quality, power is as easily lost, as it is possessed. Shaw describes how much of the teacher's behaviour is indeed guided by that fear of loss and descent into chaos. Anxiety and fantasy are inextricably linked.

Research aim

I am aware that my discussions with teachers about group work usually have revolved around looking for ways to pre-empt any problems, for example, changes that could be made to classroom organisation and task structure. Through reading the psychosocial literature on 'fantasy', I saw an opportunity to think beyond the overt and explicit purposes of group work to consider the deeper level of the psyche, where desires, fears and anxieties are unconsciously mobilised and defended against. For example, how might concerns about the teacher's loss of control link to a fantasy of omnipotent power? What magical powers might we attribute to the more capable peer in the group and his/her ability to influence the learning and behaviour of others in the group? When the more capable peer dominates the task, why do we as teachers react so negatively to this situation, particularly given that we do not attribute the same problem to our own dominance in the classroom? What do notions like 'relational closeness' indicate about how we think pupils should get along with each other in groups? Why do we become anxious when children engage in off task talk or argue in irrational and unreasoned ways? These are questions that I will be exploring through this study.

In my professional experience it is not typical to think about relationships in the classroom in terms of ideas like 'fantasy', 'anxiety' and 'psychic defences'. I imagine that discussions with teachers along these lines could be challenging and uncomfortable, yet possibly thought-provoking. **My aim is to explore the fantasies that potentially influence teachers' and pupils' experiences of group work, in order to provoke and stimulate new ways of thinking about the challenges of**

collaborative learning. Through taking a less conventional approach to talking about group work, I hope my research will provide a fresh and stimulating perspective. My research draws upon psychoanalytic theory, which deals with the irrational, with unintended consequences and with unconscious processes (Shaw, 1995). In the next chapter I provide a fuller account of this epistemological perspective.

Research context

In my study I observed different groups of children as they collaborated in the classroom and talked to the children afterwards about their experiences of working in a group. The children were in Year 5 and part of the school in which I work; they were not my own class, but I knew these children well, having taught them a number of times over the years. The school is a multi-ethnic, inner-city school in London. The indicators of social deprivation in the school catchment area are high and a significant proportion of the local housing is used to provide temporary accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers; a number of the pupils have experienced trauma and displacement in their family lives. A major feature of the school is the wide range of nationalities and languages represented by the pupil intake. Almost three quarters of the 380 pupils have English as a second language, amongst whom there is no one dominant language, although the largest group are Arabic speakers, followed by Somali. The primary school has a leadership team that actively promotes the use of talk and collaborative learning in the classroom. Given the fact that English is not the first language for most pupils, teachers are encouraged to create opportunities for pupils to talk and negotiate meanings of words, in order to develop an understanding of subject-specific language. This study of the issues around collaborative group work is therefore of interest to the senior management team who are keen to understand the affordances and constraints of this form of learning.

This study links to research that I conducted for my Institution-Focused Study (IFS) (Edmondson, 2010). Although there has been a shift of emphasis from the IFS to the thesis, the data presented here build on the knowledge and understanding that I have gained from this more long-term research journey. I appreciate that my

research presents a highly interpretive account of group work, although talking about unconscious fantasies and anxieties means it can only be thus. Walkerdine (1997) presents a strong argument for persisting in this venture:

I want to argue that the fantasies [...] are immensely important and are not to be discounted even if they turn out not to be about the data in question. I am suggesting that since we cannot escape from these fantasies, it is about time we recognised them, took them seriously and asked what they have to tell us about the research content and process. (p. 67)

Structure of the thesis

In the next chapter I provide an overview of the psychoanalytic theory upon which this research is based. I draw on the work of the psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion to think about the unconscious processes that affect the way we relate to people and the defences that might be mobilised amongst group members when unconscious anxiety pervades the group. In chapter three I deal with the methodological implications of researching the unconscious and the potential problems of drawing on research methods that have been developed in the context of the clinic. I clarify the necessary distinction between 'psychoanalysing' individuals and my own position of using psychoanalytic theory to analyse and interpret research data. In the analytic chapters I narrate four different stories of group work. In chapter four I focus on a group of three friends who were asked to accommodate a girl no-one else wanted to work with; in chapter five I reflect on the ways in which my presence in the group seemed to influence the children's ability to cope with the task. In chapter six I tell the story of four girls who appeared to have to work hard to defend against 'emotion' in the group and in chapter seven I consider how a task might have stirred up a sense of unconscious trauma in the group and created a lack of cohesion in the group. Finally, in chapter eight, I draw together these stories to return to the idea of 'fantasy'; I discuss the possible fantasies about group learning that teachers invest in and the associated anxieties that they may serve to defend against.

Chapter Two

The difficulties of learning in groups

In the previous chapter I introduced the idea that part of the reason group work might be such a difficult enterprise for pupils and teachers is because fantasies potentially influence our beliefs about what this type of learning should be like in the classroom. These fantasies might serve as a defence against thinking troublesome thoughts about group work. In this chapter I will introduce some of the psychoanalytic theory that explains why it may sometimes be difficult to engage in thinking about experience and the unconscious defence mechanisms that might be mobilised in the process.

The use of psychoanalytic theory allows us to develop a more nuanced, complex and uncertain view of what happens when a group of people try to interact with each other, since it challenges the assumption that the self is essentially rational, unified and coherent. As Stephen Frosh writes:

What we are taught to see as 'natural' in the human condition, the capacity to use reason, is only a small part of the story: behind every action is a wish, behind every thought is an unreasonable desire. (Frosh, 2002, p.17)

The part of self that is known to us is merely the tip of the iceberg. Lurking beneath this conscious part of self, there lies a 'hidden self', which is cut off from self-knowledge and disrupts any sense of rationality, unity or integration – our 'unconscious' (Elliott, 2002). On the assumption that unconscious processes permeate all mental activity, there is a way of understanding the hidden dynamics of group life that motivate and influence group behaviour. The theory that I draw on is primarily that of Wilfred Bion (1961, 1962). As a psychoanalyst, Bion notably developed his innovative group therapy method in the treatment of 'shell-shocked' soldiers during WW2 and later working with small groups at the Tavistock clinic. Within these contexts he expounded his theory about the emotional forces at play within groups, particularly that of anxiety. He observed that primitive states of mind

dominate group members, interfering with and compromising the intellectual content and declared task of the group and impairing critical judgement. His writings are influenced by the work of Melanie Klein, a leading theorist and analyst during his time and therefore this chapter will also introduce some of her key ideas. Both Klein and Bion are from a particular branch of psychoanalysis that is referred to as the 'object relations school'. It is not necessary in the context of this study to adumbrate how an object relations view differs from other schools of psychoanalytic thought; the main point of difference that is relevant here is that object-relations theory emphasises the importance of relationships with others (objects) on the development of an individual's inner world.

Bion presents some challenging ways of thinking about group learning and at times his ideas are difficult to follow. This chapter therefore draws on some key writers who provide commentaries to Bion's work, notably those of Thomas Ogden (2009), Joan and Neville Symington (1996), as well as a collection of papers edited by Malcolm Pines (1992). I have also used the work of Tamara Bibby (2010), Biddy Youell (2006) and Jenny Shaw (1995) to understand practical applications of his theory to the classroom. Since my research is concerned with exploring how children think together in a group and the challenges therein, I have chosen to structure my theoretical framework according to the following three areas:

- The role of the 'other' in thinking;
- The tensions of belonging to a group;
- Ways of dealing with difficulty and frustration in the group.

The role of the 'other' in thinking

In the clinical situation, Bion considered that the ability for a patient to come to think about his/her experience relied in many ways upon the relationship that they had with him, the analyst. He posited that an emotional experience cannot be conceived of in isolation from a relationship (Symington and Symington, 1996). This aspect of Bion's theory draws upon the ideas that had been developed by Melanie Klein; I will therefore provide an overview of Klein's theory in order to contextualise this link between thinking and others.

According to Klein (1946), anxiety is part of our being from birth. She invites us to imagine the infant who has just been born into the world – it is assaulted by new and strange sensations, from things like breathing air, surrounding sounds and smells and the pain of being hungry. Klein describes how the infant is as yet unable to attach symbols (words, images) to think about these sensations; instead they take on a hostile, terrifying existence. Furthermore, the infant is unable to perceive objects objectively, or distinguish between that which is external and internal to self. Klein, like Freud, believed in the existence of instincts of life and death within us from birth – when the infant is in a state of turmoil, unable to comprehend experiences like pain, hunger and crying, it could be that in those moments it feels overwhelmed by the destructive energy of the death drive. This death drive, she suggests, threatens to crush the force of life and hope within and is turned outward against some external object. In response to the death drive, Klein describes how the infant's ego must put defences into operation, of which the response of 'splitting' is primary.

Klein posited that 'splitting' is a way of dealing with anxiety. In her theory the first object encountered by the infant is the mother (or more specifically the mother's breast). At this stage the infant is unable to conceive of the mother as a 'whole'; instead it sees just part objects that are fragmented from one another – for example, the breast that is present and available takes on a separate existence from the one that is absent or empty. The infant needs to deal with the bad, terrifying, hostile and aggressive impulses of the death drive, for it fears being persecuted or even becoming the persecutor. Simultaneously the infant needs to protect and keep safe the good, loving, nourishing, hope-giving aspects of the life drive. Through a process of *splitting*, Klein describes how the infant creates a 'good' breast and a 'bad' breast; one is experienced as excessively good and the other as extremely bad. Love and hate, life and death are experienced as two separate object relationships. What is being denied is the possibility that an object has both good and bad elements. The good, ideal object remains untainted and can be taken in (introjected) safely, whereas all aggression, hostility and blame can be *projected* into the bad object.

Alternatively the infant can project all that is good into the 'good breast', where it is kept safe, while holding onto the part that is felt to be bad.

According to Klein, these defensive actions of *splitting* and *projection* are the basis of the *paranoid-schizoid* position (paranoid because the infant fears persecution and schizoid due to the reaction of splitting object/self into good and bad). To remain in this state would not enable the infant to develop an integrated view of the world, with the possibility of love and hate residing together in one object. Klein describes how the mother is usually capable of withstanding the infant's aggression and is able to respond patiently and lovingly to her child, offering safe 'containment' of its destructive impulses. It becomes possible for the infant to then begin to introject the mental contents that it had previously projected, for they have lost their sting and become more tolerable. Through this process the infant comes to recognise the breast, and later the mother, as a whole object, no longer split into good and bad – learning about self develops and an integrated ego is formed. This is known as the *depressive* position. A key aspect of this development is the reparative wishes and actions that emerge from the constellation of anxiety and guilt, as a result of a sense that the infant has harmed or damaged the object (mother) and may do so again in the future. Klein suggested that the depressive position is crucial to a realistic view of the world, but it often involves uncomfortable feelings. The person I love is also the person I hate. I damage those I love and I lose treasured relationships by my actions. But as Frosh writes "*if we can appreciate this, then we can turn those experiences into something creative, through processes of mourning and reparation that are perhaps the central aspects of a meaningful, meaning-filled life*" (2011, p. 17). Although the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions originate with the development of the infant, Klein maintained that they operate throughout our life.

Bion became aware of the relevance of the shift between the paranoid-schizoid (PS) position and the depressive (D) position to the process of thinking (Symington and Symington, 1996). He described how thinking consists of a move from a formless state where images and ideas are dispersed, fragmented and chaotic (the PS state of mind) to a state where coherence becomes manifest and a new understanding is

realised (the D state). According to him, every understanding takes place through this move (PS \leftrightarrow D). Our fears and defences against learning from experience become the very experiences from which we learn, hence the oscillation between the two positions.

For Bion, this ability to hold onto emotional experience and bear the tensions, so as to think about it depends largely on the 'containing' aspects of a relationship with another. The model he used is that of the young infant depending on its mother to process the unbearable primitive sensations which it projects into her. It is the mother's capacity for taking inside her own mind the intolerable emotional experience of the infant, processing it and ultimately giving it back to the infant in a modified form that renders an experience tolerable for the infant. For example, when the mother hears her baby crying, she holds in her mind the aspects that might be causing distress and offers an appropriate response to soothe her child, for example, a feed, dry nappy or a cuddle. Bion took this model and applied it to the analytic relationship between analyst and client (Symington and Symington, 1996). He examined the emotional atmosphere and the feeling of the session, as well as his own emotional state. He believed that his thoughts, feelings and desires often provided an indication of what was being projected into him by the client and therefore he could learn about the client's inner world by attending to these feelings. Not only that, he could become the container for the client's disturbing ideas and feelings and try and offer back a response that would make it easier for his client to think about reality. There is the sense in which the researcher, like the analyst, can become aware of the feelings that are being projected into him/her by the research participant – aspects, perhaps, that cannot be spoken about or put into words (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2002; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). By attending to these feelings, the researcher might significantly enhance what he/she would learn about participants' feelings. This methodological application of Bion's theory will be looked at in the next chapter.

This aspect of the 'containing' function of a relationship can be applied to the group (Nitsun, 1996; Mawson, 1994; Bibby, 2010). Chris Mawson looks at how discussion in

the small group forum can be used to contain anxiety in working with 'damaged' children and bring about change in their attitudes and behaviour. He stresses, however, that a shift in emotional climate does not necessarily mean freedom from anxiety:

[C]hange is not easy since it involves a shift from a highly defensive and mistrustful attitude towards one of regret, verging on depression as individuals recognise how efforts to protect themselves led to treating others badly. (1994, p. 7)

Fears of what others are doing to us are replaced by a fear of what we have done to others. Whilst this is the basis for genuine concern, the sense of one's insufficiency and culpability can be painful to bear. This links back to Klein's idea about the shift from a 'paranoid-schizoid' position to a 'depressive' position, which is marked by a sense of guilt and a desire to make reparation for ways in which we might have damaged others. Although the potential for transformation and change in the group is encouraging, others write about what happens when group relations become damaged by affects like envy and greed, meaning that unconscious, sensory experiences remain unprocessed and incoherent. Nitsun describes this failure in the containing relationship of the group:

[T]he failed group becomes impregnated with the chaotic and persecutory elements of the uncontained, leaving the membership floundering in a morass of unprocessed and unresolved experience. In this situation, learning is impossible. (1996, p. 66)

Britton (1992) also describes the dangers of what happens when elements of experience remain unprocessed: if a pupil feels that they cannot 'get through' to another pupil, or the teacher, and that they are making no impact or impression on the person that they are addressing, then an intensification may occur in their efforts to project and enforce feelings within the other. The situation can then degenerate if the other person responds to this by 'hardening' inside and communicating this through choice of words, expression or tone of voice. What I have begun to touch upon are the difficulties that are faced in being part of a group.

In this next section I will use Bion's theory about groups to explain in more detail the tensions that can exist for individuals in a relationship of dependence on others.

The tensions of belonging to a group

In *'Experiences in Groups'* Bion (1961) stressed the inseparability of the group and the individual and the on-going interpenetration between the two. The group, he says, is more than a collection of individuals – it is an entity in itself. This view challenges the traditional dichotomy in which the individual and the group are set against each other. In this section I will be drawing upon this seminal text to understand the relationships between the individual and the group and the difficulties of dependency.

Bion suggested that whilst the individual needs the group to fulfil his/her needs, the group is often also a source of frustration. We are dependent on others for our learning, yet this dependence brings difficulties and frustration. There might be conflict, for example, between the desires of the individual and those of the group. Bibby (2010) relates these ideas to the classroom, where pupils may want to feel that they belong to the group, but fear that in doing so they will not be recognised for their own contributions, skills and attributes and therefore lose their distinctiveness. Youell (2006) also applies these tensions to the school situation: we may seek out groups to help define us and give meaning to our lives, yet group membership often challenges our capacity to cooperate, to be realistic about our strengths and weaknesses, to recognise the contribution of others and to tolerate difference. According to Bion, we are 'group' animals and the group is essential to the fulfilment of our mental life, however the power of the group to fulfil our individual needs is sometimes challenged by the group itself.

The way Bion understands the group's constraints of personal fulfilment draws on and develops the ideas that Freud set out in *'Civilisation and its Discontents'* (1930). Here Freud described the fundamental tensions that exist between the individual and civilisation. Friction stems from the individual's desire to gratify his/her instincts (for example, sexual or murderous desires) yet civilisation's contrary demands for

conformity and instinctual repression. In order to promote happiness and harmony, civilisations create laws that prohibit killing, rape and adultery, along with punishments if these laws are transgressed. Freud argues that laws designed for our happiness actually prevent the fulfilment of primitive instincts for pleasure within each of us; perpetual feelings of discontent therefore exist amongst members of society. Freud's theory about the centrality of the pleasure instinct cannot be directly translated to an object-relations view (of which Bion is a part). In object-relations theory, pleasure is still important, but the self is primarily object-seeking rather than pleasure seeking (Elliott, 2002). The significant people in our lives are a necessary part of our psychological development, yet too often socially destructive relationships distort and compromise this process.

Bion suggested that when an individual is part of a group his/her unconscious needs and desires feed into the pool of unconscious contributions that others have made also – this he termed the *group mentality*:

It can be seen that what the individual says or does in a group illumines both his own personality and his view of the group; sometimes his contributions illumine one more than the other. Some contributions he is prepared to make as coming unmistakably from himself, but there are others which he would wish to make anonymously. If the group can provide the means by which contributions can be made anonymously, then the foundations are laid for a successful system of evasion and denial [...] I shall postulate the group mentality as the pool to which anonymous contributions are made, and through which the impulses and desires implicit in these contributions are gratified. (*Experiences in Groups*, 1961, p.50)

Linked to the idea of the 'group mentality' is the *group culture*. This can be thought of as the group atmosphere and the ways in which members relate to each other. Bion noted that the term 'culture' is used in a loose sense, within which is included the structure which the group achieves at any given moment, the occupation it pursues and the organisation it develops. Brown (2000) suggests that 'group mentality' might reflect unconscious processes and 'group culture' might refer to more conscious, overt behaviour. However, Bion himself stated that the group

situation is mostly perplexing and confused; group 'mentality' and 'culture' often merge together and only occasionally emerge in any strikingly clear way. He remarked that since the analyst is as involved in the emotional situation as his patients, it makes it even harder to 'see' the situation. This is interesting, for the same could be said of the teacher and his/her pupils. We often consider that the teacher is outside of the group and therefore able to 'see' what is happening within the group and provide the appropriate guidance. Taking Bion's perspective, the teacher is as emotionally involved in the group as the children and is also contributing to the pool of unconscious needs and desires, problematising fantasies of an objective observing function.

The idea that there might be an unconscious group 'mentality' and 'culture' affords us a different way of explaining the frustrations of group life. We may recognise, for example, being part of a group and coming away from the situation feeling out of sorts. By drawing on the theory of Klein and Bion, such experiences can be described in terms of the projection of parts of self into the group and the introjection of other people's unwanted psychic material:

Most of us have the experience of finding ourselves in a group situation, behaving in a way that feels out of character and was certainly not intended. We may be shocked that we could have become so angry, so upset, so determined, so competitive, or whatever. We may find ourselves being unusually loud or quiet, provocative or conciliatory. In social groupings we may be suddenly flirtatious and reckless or cautious and disapproving. If these responses are truly out of character, it is probably the case that we have been the recipients of powerful projections of parts of the personalities of other group members (Youell, 2006, p. 109).

For Bion, the frustrations created by the dual pull of our individuality and our 'groupishness' gives rise to new or yet more unconscious anxiety. It is this anxiety that can affect the ability of the group to focus on the explicit task that has been set by the teacher. In this next section I will detail the ways in which the group defends against this anxiety.

Ways of dealing with difficulty and frustration in the group

Earlier in the chapter I outlined the theory about troublesome, uncertain and anxious thoughts/situations that can prompt us to mobilise defences that split and hold apart our experiences; with splitting the possibility of genuine thinking is weakened. Klein talked about how this was represented by the paranoid-schizoid position and Bion related this position to evading learning from experience. In *Experiences in Groups*, Bion developed these ideas further in terms of the group mentality that is able to think ("*the work group*") against the group mentality that cannot engage in thinking (what he terms "*the basic assumption groups*").

Bion's major hypothesis was that when any group of people meet to accomplish a task, there are in actuality two aspects of group mentality/culture present. There is the *sophisticated work group* (referred to as the W group) but this group is '*constantly perturbed by influences that come from other group mental phenomena*' (Bion, 1961, p. 129) which are primarily what Bion called the *basic assumption groups* (referred to as the ba groups). In the W group, all members are engaged with the primary task; their anxieties are contained and the task is sufficiently worthwhile to enable work to take place. They search for knowledge through using their experiences, probing reality in a scientific way by hypothesis testing and being aware of the processes that will further learning and development. Since group members are able to hold together the frustration of dealing with conflicting and uncertain knowledge, their thinking represents that of the *depressive* position. The W group mobilises sophisticated mental activity on the part of its members which they demonstrate through their productivity.

In many ways the 'work group' state represents the fantasy of collaborative learning that I noted in the introduction. The problem is, however, that the W group state is not necessarily typical or stable. What tends to happen is that group behaviour becomes ineffective and focused on issues other than the explicit task that has been set. Bion describes how in this situation the group rejects 'scientific method' and any activity that might appear to be approaching this ideal. As with a paranoid-schizoid position, there is hatred towards learning because forefront in the group mentality is

anxiety about facing an emotional experience for which they do not feel prepared. The group fears and hates the fact that processes of learning and maturing requires the toleration of feelings of not knowing, of confusion and of powerlessness. Instead the group might become focused on some other issue that suddenly takes on great importance. Stokes (1994) gives the example of a staff team, who spend a meeting obsessing about the issue of the kettle. He describes how '*apparently trivial matters are described as if they were matters of life or death, which is how they may well feel to the members of the group, since the underlying anxieties are about psychological survival*' (p. 22). Against anxiety, group members need to feel secure and therefore they collectively invest in *basic assumptions*. Bion used this term to refer to the primitive states of mind and the regression in behaviour which are inevitably generated when people combine in a group. The basic assumption group can be thought of as the "as if" group, meaning that the group unconsciously behaves "as if" certain tacit assumptions were held by the members. He identified three types of ba groups – the *dependency*, the *fight-flight* and the *pairing* groups. Life in a ba group is oriented towards inner fantasy, not external reality.

Bion describes how in a dependency group (baD) the aim of group members, and the assumption on which they work, is that they are met to receive a feeling of security and protection from one of their members. This leader is invested with qualities of omnipotence and omniscience, is idealised and made into a kind of god. The feeling is that only the leader knows anything and only the leader can solve the problems of the group. Such a leader is a magical person who does not need information – he or she instinctively understands the needs of group members. The behaviour of the group is oriented towards extracting wisdom, power and goodness from the leader, to overcome their common sense of need, helplessness and fear. Bibby (2010) relates this to groups in the classroom who demand endless explanations and reassurance, who want the teacher to 'just' know and understand them without any effort on their part and who position the teacher to spoon-feed the answers. A leader in the dependent group cannot possibly fulfil the expected role; disappointment and hostility begin to develop in the group and eventually the group

will dismiss one leader and appoint another in his/her place, only for the next leader to face a similar fate.

According to Bion, the experience of being in a basic assumption pairing (baP) culture is to be in a group that becomes focussed on supporting two members who are believed to be able to bring new life and salvation to the group. The wish, in unconscious fantasy, is that the pair will produce a Messiah, a Saviour, either in the form of a person or a new idea. Whilst there is this sense of union for reproduction, the gender of the two people constituting the pair is in fact immaterial. The ethos of the group is one of hopefulness and expectation, in that present moment. There can be no feelings of destructiveness, despair, or hatred. Crucially, nothing must be created in actuality, otherwise the hopefulness will vanish. Bion gives the example from one of his groups where two group members became engrossed in their own private conversation, and the group as a whole assumed that they were involved with each other. Instead of becoming impatient with the pair for distracting individuals from airing their own problems, Bion noted that the group allowed the pair to continue their conversation and indeed became focused on it.

Bion's third basic assumption group is that of fight/flight (baF/F). The unconscious assumption of the group is to preserve itself by fighting a perceived enemy or fleeing from something or someone. The leader in such a culture is considered to be of central importance because he or she is a leader for action: either into fight by attack or into flight. The leader has the power because he/she can play on the overwhelming anxiety that the members of the group feel. In bonding together to fight or run away from a common foe, group members share a sense of purpose and "groupishness", possibly for the first time. However, Bion notes that a leader who fails to afford the group the opportunity for retreat or attack will be considered ineffective and ultimately ignored. In a fight/flight mode of functioning, fear, suspicion and dread of annihilation prevail, as well as conflicts around hostility and aggressive control. Bibby (2010) provides an illustrative example from the classroom, where pupils might collude with the non-compliant behaviour of a fellow pupil who is challenging the teacher. So long as they invest power in the leadership of the

disruptive pupil, they can escape from the teacher, the learning he/she embodies and the anxiety that they feel.

In his commentary on Bion's theory, Ogden (2009) draws out the illusion and fantasy that forms the basis of ba behaviour. The ba group is powerfully drawn to forms of 'non-thinking' or what Ogden terms 'magical thinking' (p.94). Instead of facing reality and putting in the effort to engage in genuine thinking, the group wants to just arrive at knowing the solutions, for example through depending on a god-like leader or thinking a 'new idea' will magically appear from a fantasised union. Ogden describes how magical thinking is useless in our attempt to learn from experience or to grow psychologically. Magical ideas cannot be linked with other ideas in the process of generating a line of rational thought and in this way experience remains fragmented. Whilst magical thinking might present an ideal place in that moment, it is yet a nightmare: *'one cannot learn or grow; one is damned to live in an eternal, directionless present'* (Ogden, 2009, p.95). Ogden reminds us that the work group and the ba group are two facets of a single experience. Defensive positions in relation to anxiety can become the very experiences from which the group learns about itself. We do not need to be damned forever.

It is rare for a group to consistently live up to the ideal of the work group and no group is likely to function completely at the basic assumption level either. Instead, aspects of the work group and basic assumption group are at play at different times and with varying intensity. Each of us has a tendency to enter into the unconscious aspect of group life at different moments and to a different degree, just as everyone has a tendency toward differing levels of cooperation within the work group. Basic assumption behaviour can also have positive aspects, in that it creates the illusion that the group can survive the experience of being together and operate as a unit. Stokes (1994) for example describes how *BaD* groups provide elements of happiness for group members; their roles are simple and they are relieved of anxiety and responsibility.

In chapter one I introduced the aim of my research, namely, to explore the fantasies that potentially influence teachers' and pupils' experiences of group work, in order to stimulate fresh ways of thinking about the challenges of collaborative learning. In this chapter I have outlined the psychoanalytic theory within which the idea of 'fantasy' is located. I focused on how unconscious anxiety is created through disturbing elements of uncontained, unprocessed and unresolved experience and this pertains not only to the individual but also the group. I looked at the defensive behaviours that might be mobilised when unconscious anxiety circulates the group; for example, the group might invest in a fantasy of excessive idealisation (depending on a leader imbued with 'god-like' status or believing a particular pairing in the group will bring forth new hope) or a fantasy of persecution (fighting or fleeing from a perceived enemy). Fantasies can both defend against anxiety and also create anxiety. In the next chapter I will look at the implications of researching the unconscious on my research methodology.

Chapter Three

Challenges of researching the unconscious

In the first part of this chapter I will outline my research questions and briefly describe my methods. Most of my focus in this chapter is given to the methodological implications of researching the unconscious dynamics of groups, particularly in terms of a) adapting clinical methods of observation and interviewing, b) researcher subjectivity and c) ethics.

Research questions

I have used my theoretical framework to construct my research questions; they are as follows:

1. How do the children work to deal with the explicit task that has been set by the teacher for the group?
2. What fantasies might children (and their teacher) hold about group learning and the relationships of dependence therein?
3. What might these fantasies suggest about unconscious anxieties in relation to group work?

I understand that there are times when group work is an enjoyable, positive experience. However, since my aim is to gain insight into the challenges of group working, it seems appropriate to focus on the moments when defences appear to be mobilised in the group to cope with tensions. The tentative nature of my research questions is intentional; this study's theoretical position is one of uncertainty and ambiguity. Shaw believes this ambiguous nature of psychoanalytically informed research is valuable; it serves to open up our thinking, rather than close it down:

Psychoanalysis is a theory of meaning and symbols; it is open-ended, not final. It aims to provoke and stimulate, to lead to another train of ideas. A recent justification of it as a way of telling stories praises the ambiguity of psychoanalysis for returning the reader to his or her thoughts. (1995, p.6)

Research methods

I decided to observe the children as they interacted in small groups and to interview them immediately afterwards. My observation of each group was during a regular lesson; the lessons that I watched were determined by when group work was happening on the days I was available to observe. After each observation, I went with the group into a separate room and we spent the next thirty to forty minutes discussing the experience of working together. The immediacy of this discussion time from the group task was intentional; I did not want the children to lose the sense of what they had just experienced. I conducted the discussion as a group, rather than individually, since I saw it as a continuation of the group task, whereby the children were still working through the issues of being part of a group. I use the term discussion because in many ways this was more informal than the term interview implies. I did not have a pre-prepared schedule of questions, nor did I make notes during the session, however, I did use an audio-recorder. Straight after each observation and discussion I wrote down my thoughts, impressions and feelings about the group experience. Hinshelwood and Skogstad (2000) encourage the researcher to write up a record as soon as possible, putting down all that is recalled, including emotional responses. These records are not designed to add to the reliability of the data, nor are they intended to be an exhaustive, or even a completely 'accurate' record. What they do help build, however, are the unconscious links and emphases which have been picked out by the researcher in the moment.

I conducted five observations and five discussions in all (i.e. five groups). I have used four of these data samples to create four case studies. I wanted to describe each case study in detail and to include a fifth case study would have compromised the depth of the others. The group I did not include was the one where the transcription was impeded by poor audio-recording quality. Some may question the limitations of this study on the basis of my small sample. Others might argue that much can be gained from even one case study, after all, eminent psychoanalysts, like Freud and Klein, often advanced some of their most important theories in the context of a single case study. There are a number of examples of psychosocial research where

papers have been published on the basis of one case study (e.g. Clarke, 2002; Roseneil, 2006; Hollway and Jefferson, 2005). Another point to note about my small sample is that this research builds on similar observations and discussions that I undertook for my IFS (Edmondson, 2010) and therefore the range of groups that I have studied extend beyond those that I present in this document.

Sample selection

To select the groups I considered the set of circumstances around the group composition that I felt would create an interesting context for observation, in terms of the potential tensions that might occur. A focus on the tensions of being in a group fitted with my theoretical framework and addressed my aim to gain insight into the challenges of group learning. My group selection was made just before the lesson, in consultation with the teacher about how she was structuring the groups (except for the lesson where the children chose their own groups – group 1 – when my decision was made within the lesson).

I used personal knowledge of the children to guide my selection. In one maths lesson I chose to observe a group comprised of three friends, who were asked by the teacher to include a girl that I knew no-one wanted to work with (group 1). Another day I chose a group that the teacher had put together, which included a girl known for her aggressive and violent behaviour (group 3). Then there was a group that contained two competitive children who both endeavoured to occupy the 'top' academic position in the class (group 4). I understand that many would criticise my ad-hoc approach to sampling and the lack of purposeful strategy. I would contend that selecting a sample is never a purely rational, conscious decision; I believe unconscious motivations influence sample choice, even in the most apparently neutral and objective studies. The seemingly 'spur of the moment' approach to sampling is of interest to me in exploring my emotional involvement in the process of group selection. For example, one day a girl approached me and expressed a strong desire to be part of the research (group 2). My reflection on researcher subjectivity with this particular group includes an examination of how my decision to

observe this girl reflected my own insecurities and desires, for I wanted to believe that she had chosen me and approved of me.

It is important to understand that I was not looking to make generalisations from one group to another. From my epistemological perspective, each group presents a unique set of circumstances that affects the unconscious dynamic in that given moment. What I hope my research does afford are opportunities for the reader to reflect upon how the groups I describe resonate with groups that they have experienced. On the next page is a table summarising contextual details of each group (*Table 1*).

Table 1: Contextual details for each group

Pseudonyms of children in group (gender)		How group was determined	Lesson and outline of task
Group 1	Arwa (F)	Friendship group <i>(three friends with addition of Lauren, who was placed in group by the teacher)</i>	Maths 'Number strings': <i>Generating sequences of numbers by following a rule (from a given start number, next number in sequence is created by halving the number if it is even and adding 1 if it is odd; continue until the sequence reaches 1 – e.g. 15, 16, 8, 4, 2, 1). Comparing different sequences to establish a pattern or relationship.</i>
	Gita (F)		
	Malika (F)		
	Lauren (F)		
Group 2	Mahad (M)	Table group <i>(teacher assigned places where children sat for large parts of school day)</i>	History 'Romans in Britain': <i>Looking at photos of Roman artefacts/remains from archaeological digs e.g. weapons, coins, parts of villas, roads; deciding which archaeological findings suggest the Romans invaded and which indicate they settled.</i>
	Jarek (M)		
	Aaliyah (F)		
	Shanise (F)		
Group 3	Esther (F)	Teacher assigned group <i>(on basis of good role models for behaviour three of the girls would provide to Daniella)</i>	Maths 'Counting squares': <i>Drawing a series of squares on 1cm squared paper, increasing in size, i.e. 1cm², 2cm², 3cm² etc; counting how many smaller squares can be seen within each square outline and establishing a rule that can be applied for finding the number of squares for any given outline.</i>
	Daniella (F)		
	Naima (F)		
	Salma (F)		
Group 4	Bailey (M)	Teacher assigned group <i>(on the basis of the support Mahad and Amanda - the 'more able'- would provide for the other two)</i>	English 'One child policy': <i>Follow on from book being read in class about a brother sent into hiding as a result of one child policy of fictional totalitarian state. Group debate about one child policy, with encouragement to consider all aspects (e.g. moral, social and economic issues).</i>
	Mahad (M)		
	Simeon (M)		
	Amanda (F)		

Although I have included the gender of each child in the table, I have not provided details of ethnicity. I did not wish to identify the children more than necessary, given that some children in this study were in a minority ethnic group in the class (for some, a minority of one). Some might argue that aspects like children's ethnicity, religion and migration status are deeply significant to research that looks at the tensions of belonging to groups and that omission of this information about the participants represents a serious lack. However, I believe there is a danger of treating gender, race and ethnicity as static and unitary variables. Phoenix (2001), for example, argues that masculinities and femininities are represented through plural positions and are intertwined with children's situated social and cultural identities. Ali (2003) likewise warns of the essentialist way in which we might treat race and calls for us to consider it in a way very similar to that of gender – not categories of being, but states of becoming and a process that is materialised through discourse.

Taking a dynamic, relational view of gender, race and ethnicity adds complexity to my research. An analysis of the ways in which the group constrained or created options for children to express their gendered, classed and racialised identities is beyond the scope of this study; instead I have chosen to highlight these aspects in sections of the data. For example, in chapter four, I think about how ethnicity might have contributed to feelings of being an outsider to the group. In chapter five I look at the gendered and racialised nature of expressing feelings and in the following chapter continue this theme in looking at girls and aggression. In chapter six I consider problems of being positioned as the 'nice girl' and how gender conflicts become heightened when the teacher declares that only one member can act as spokesperson for the group. I appreciate that I am only touching lightly upon a potentially complex web of analysis. I feel a detailed interpretation of how social and cultural identities in the group affect the ability of group members to focus on the task awaits another, more expansive research project.

I have presented each group as a separate case study, drawing on my theoretical framework to interpret the data and construct a *narrative* of the group experience.

My understanding of narrative is that it is a way *'to organise a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole'* (Elliott, 2005, p.3). I appreciate that as the researcher I impose meaning on events and experiences in response to my own context; incorporating researcher reflexivity into the narrative is therefore important (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001). In my analysis I wanted to maintain a sense of the 'whole' group experience and so I chose not to break down the transcript into coded segments or attempt cross case analysis. I did not want to 'rationalise' the data by making it fit with themes that I had constructed (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). My framework for analysis is drawn from the psycho-social research of Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001); it involves three layers:

1. *Considering the overall narrative* – this was about providing a general picture of the group's experience;
2. *Problematizing the narrative* – here I focused in on certain parts of the data, which I felt to be significant in terms of my theoretical framework. For example, I looked at the inconsistencies in the children's words and the apparent ambivalences and conflicts that these suggested. I also paid close attention to the images and metaphors used. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the use of metaphor is a central organising principle for the way we think; concrete concepts are a way of thinking about more abstract ones and therefore metaphorical language is not arbitrary or simply ornamental, rather integral to mental processes. There is the problem, however, of becoming fixed on one idea that fits neatly with the metaphor, to the detriment of missing other aspects of a concept inconsistent with the imagery; I therefore tried to consider different interpretations when metaphors were used.
3. *Reflecting on my own role as researcher* – this included thinking about my position in the group and the ways in which I appeared to contribute to the unconscious processes of the group; I examined how my own fears, fantasies and defences affected my interpretation of the group experience.

For the remaining part of this chapter I want to focus on the particular issues that arise from drawing on psychoanalytic theory in social science research. First I explore how appropriate it is to translate observation and interview methods from the clinic to the research field. Next I consider how the researcher is positioned within theory of the unconscious and the inter-psychic dimension of the research encounter. Finally I examine the ethics of allowing children to talk about potentially distressing aspects of their experience.

Learning from clinical methods

Through the work of eminent, pioneering psychoanalysts like Freud, Klein and Bion, clinical methods have been developed that help the analyst understand the ways in which unconscious processes influence and intertwine with more conscious processes in the mental life of the client. In this section I will look at how some social science researchers have drawn on clinical methods in their research models and consider my own position.

Observations

Much of my research is based upon observations of children in groups. I was not psychoanalysing the children, but I did want to understand how I could be alert to the potential unconscious processes that might have been circulating the group. As a starting point I turned to observation methods instituted in the clinic.

Melanie Klein developed much of her psychoanalytic theory in relation to her observations of children. She observed the infant as it expressed itself through toys and play and interpreted the possible unconscious fantasies and anxieties of the infant that were suggested by the way it interacted with the play materials (Bollas, 2001). Esther Bick has since become a leading figure on infant observation in psychoanalytic practice (as detailed by Rustin, 2009). Her method is based upon the analyst finding a 'space' from which to observe – a space that is as neutral as possible, yet not rigid, to enable him or her to experience the emotional impact of the infant's presence. The observer must come unburdened by theoretical preconceptions, be receptive without interfering and avoid making premature

judgements. Bick also stated that notes must not be taken during the observation, since she believed it would detract from achieving an awareness of the emotional dynamic.

Hinshelwood and Skogstad (2000) have taken Bick's method of infant observation and applied it to observing health care institutions. They used it in the context of a training project for young doctors, with the aim of developing the doctors' sensitivity to ward atmospheres and team morale in the psychiatric service. They state that the observer needs to be aware of three aspects: a) the objective events happening, b) the emotional atmosphere and c) his/her own inner experience. Crucially the observer must be an 'outsider' to the organisation under observation to 'see' events without the prejudice of an insider. Although their research context is a very different one from psychoanalysing young children, they have confidence that a clinical method of observation is appropriate. The application of psychoanalytic theory to the research of organisations is well established, whereby unconscious processes are assumed to influence not just the individual but also structures of society, e.g. hospitals (Menzies-Lyth, 1960), schools (Shaw, 1995 ; Bibby, 2010) and social, health and welfare organisations (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994). Lapping (2011) argues that psychoanalytic ideas are not static, concrete concepts, but representations of unknowable abstractions and therefore open to reification in different contexts.

I was interested in the emotional dynamic between group members when they come together to work on a task, however, I was not an outsider to the organisation I researched. Hinshelwood and Skogstad describe the anxiety that the observer feels and in many ways this was heightened by my insider status:

The observer's role, despite its relatively passive quality, is usually an anxious one. Indeed, it is so partly because it is passive. Restraint from accepting invitations to become more involved is stressful and threatens to make the observer seem a rejecting figure. When distressing things happen, or indeed when joyful or exciting things occur, the urge to become involved creates an internal struggle in the observer (2000, p. 22).

Since the children knew me as their teacher, they would often make conversation with me during the group task, for example, seeking reassurance with their work. In such moments I felt unsure about how to respond. When children ‘messed around’ during the task, I sometimes felt anger and wanted to intervene, defaulting to my position of teacher. The tension existed because as a teacher my power was largely defined by status, but as a researcher I was keen to develop power in a ‘relational’ way, where aspects like understanding and respect are considered to have the capacity to transcend structural power differences (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). In chapter four I explore the tensions between these types of power, when a girl called Lauren treated me more as an equal, both in the manner in which she addressed me and in her decision to walk away from the group discussion to attend to other matters. In such moments, it became very difficult to assume any kind of ‘detached’, ‘non-judgemental’ position of observer as suggested by Hinshelwood and Skogstad. What I have drawn from their model of observation is the importance of attending to my perceptions of the emotional atmosphere and my own inner experience, in addition to observable events within the group (discussed more fully in the section on researcher subjectivity).

Interviews

When conducting ‘interviews’ with the children I understood that I needed to think about how to structure the discussion so as to gain some indication of unconscious feelings and motivations, something that is not necessarily possible with traditional interview methods.

Freud believed that we could understand the work of the unconscious through *free association*. Bollas (2001) describes ‘free association’ as the patient speaking of whatever occurs in the moment, without fear of consequence, supported by the analyst’s silence and absence of judgement. He outlines how Freud believed free association to be the goal of psychoanalysis; through speaking of dream material, the work of the unconscious can be accessed and through the process of using words to describe images of the mind, the imaginary and pre-verbal is transformed

into the symbolic and verbal order. In this way the analysand is thought to be drawn back to deep internal imaginings and language takes on an unconscious depth. Freud crucially stated that the analyst must surrender himself to his own unconscious mental activity during the analysis session and no attempt must be made to consciously formulate an interpretation of the dream material. Over time a chain of ideas might develop, but the analyst must allow this to emerge without forming a premature idea of what is taking place.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) have applied the idea of free association to interviewing methods in social science research. Their interest is in the positions that individuals construct through their talk, which are taken to be indicative of anxieties, defences and particular ways of relating that develop in infancy and recur later in life; the context of their research is people's experiences of crime. Hollway and Jefferson's approach is to elicit a narrative from the research participant that enables the 'story' of his/her experience to emerge, without disturbance or imposition from the interviewer. They talk about becoming almost 'invisible' as the interviewer in this process and not trying to influence the interview agenda, preferring to think of their role as that of 'facilitating catalyst' (p.36) to the stories that were told. They did not follow a pre-planned interview schedule, but allowed the respondent to roam different subjects to open up access to a person's concerns.

Given that my own research is premised on the way children defend against anxiety when working collaboratively, Hollway and Jefferson's work has been an important influence on my approach to interviewing the children. However it strikes me that attributing the term 'free association' to the interview context is problematic. For example, the idea of the interviewer as an unobtrusive listener is very different from the position of 'listener' in Freud's view, which involves surrendering self to one's own unconscious material. Then there is the position of the analysand – free association does not fit with the usual conventions of communication, for the analysand is encouraged to speak of whatever comes to mind, regardless of how outrageous or strange spoken thoughts might sound; the analyst meanwhile does not provide the usual communicative responses of a listener. However, reading

through examples of interview transcripts from Hollway and Jefferson's research, the interactions clearly fit the usual communication conventions of the interview context – respondents talk about content generally relevant to the topic and interviewers provide acknowledgment, reassurance and other brief interjections during the narrative. There is also the problem that a couple of interviews (as Hollway and Jefferson did) cannot equal the many months (or even years) of regular sessions of free association that a client might undertake in analysis, before the analyst might begin to sense an interpretation of what is happening at an unconscious level (Bollas, 2001). Kvale (1999) describes how *'the unique nature of the therapeutic conversation with the trust of personal interrelation opens for layers of self-disclosure not available in a brief research interview'* (p. 103).

What needs to be emphasised is that the research interview has a different goal from the therapeutic interview. Kvale believes, however, that the therapeutic interview can yet inform approaches to empirical research. It fits well with postmodern conceptions of the interview, where there is an emphasis on knowledge as contextual and interrelational, neither inside a person nor outside in the world, but existing in the relationship between person and world. Kvale also cites the importance of tacit knowing; much of the therapists' knowledge is based on intuition, empathy, and listening to what goes on in the therapeutic relationship. In a similar way, the researcher can bring to bear knowledge gained as a practitioner in the field. Certainly I would argue that the relationship I had built up with the children facilitated my use of intuition and empathy.

How did I apply these ideas to my own interviews? In my discussion with the children I wanted them to be able to talk about their experiences of group work without me imposing my own agenda of what I thought they should be discussing. I did not mind when this involved them talking about issues not directly related to group work, for I understood that relationships in the playground or home or outside school all contributed in some small or major way to the relationships in the group and to the anxieties and defences therein. This builds on an object-relations view of the unconscious, which emphasises the *relational* aspect of it. Hinshelwood

(1991) describes the structure of the unconscious as that of a 'small society', a mesh of relationships between all the different representations of others we have internalised since birth. From this perspective, the key to understanding the unconscious is to look at the way we relate to people, for the relationships that we forge throughout life are unconsciously influenced by our relationships from infancy and childhood. In wanting to open up the narrative to take account of these wider relationships, I found it useful to draw on Hollway and Jefferson's key points to consider in interviewing:

- *asking open-ended questions*, particularly those that *elicit stories* ('tell me about a time when....');
- *avoiding 'why' questions*, since this presupposes that there are rational, conscious explanations for our actions, thoughts and feelings;
- *following up with respondents' ordering and phrasing* in order to respect and retain the meaning frame, rather than assume an interpretation.

The inter-psychic dimension of researcher subjectivity

Through the influence of feminist research there has been a move towards 'reflexivity' – a critical examination of the researcher's position and the influence of his/her power on the way data are interpreted and represented and the way knowledge is produced (for example, Reay, 1998). This perspective stands opposed to the idea of the objective, detached researcher and the possibility that a research method might exist that will produce data uncontaminated by the research process. A psychosocial viewpoint of researcher subjectivity, however, goes beyond thinking about the effects of, say, the researcher's gender, class, age or ethnicity on the research process. The influence of the researcher runs much deeper, to take account of the *relational* and *dynamic* unconscious processes that are assumed to exist between researcher and the research subject(s) (e.g. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Hunt, 1989). The suggestion is that to understand the unconscious dynamic of the research encounter, the researcher has to be prepared to examine his/her own fantasies, fears, desires and defences.

This insertion of the researcher's own experience into the research process can add a strong autobiographical element to the research narrative. Hunt (1989), for example, describes how fieldwork involves 'the discovery of self through the detour of the other' (p. 42). Valerie Walkerdine (1997) also includes much autobiographical detail about her relationship with her father in her research about young girls and popular culture. Walkerdine acknowledges the criticism of others towards her approach, namely the accusation of narcissism and the intrusion of the researcher on the data. She suggests, however, '*that it is an impossible task to avoid the place of the subjective in research, and that, instead of making futile attempts to avoid something which cannot be avoided, we should think more carefully about how to utilise our subjectivity as a feature of the research process*' (1997, p. 59). Her suggestion is that from taking this approach, more can be gained than it is feared will be lost.

The assumption that what the researcher 'knows' is co-constructed in and through the relationship with the research subject means that knowledge becomes temporally and interpersonally positioned, contingent and provisional (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008). This renders traditional notions of reliability and validity problematic, as well as research principles of 'authenticity' and 'realism'. Some might argue that this devalues the merit of research, particularly when it is designed to have an impact on professional practice. However, since this research draws on a theoretical position that explores the ways in which our unconscious fantasies and fears intertwine with and influence conscious processes, traditional dichotomies of objective and subjective, the real and the imaginary become less fixed and clear-cut.

The fact that the researcher's subjectivity is firmly placed within the process of data production makes it clear that analysis and interpretations will be contingent upon the researcher's own experience. When Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) were researching the lives of women, they could see the way in which members of the team interpreted the same set of data differently. They noted, however, that in sharing their varied interpretations with each other, they were not necessarily aiming to come to a consensus about meaning. In their view, psychoanalytic

interpretation of results should be treated as choosing to tell one story from among many different stories that could be told. Elsewhere Walkerdine (1997) argues that our aim in interpretation should not be to reduce differences in the belief that this will give greater proximity to the truth, but to make use of these differences to tell a more complex story. Thomas Ogden (2009), a clinician and supervisor to training psychoanalysts, also makes clear that when he presents a patient's case to his students, he is not able to re-present what originally happened in the clinic, as if it were scientific fact – *'rather, the patient who is presented in the supervisory session is a fiction created in the medium of words, voice, physical movements (e.g. the supervisee's hand gestures), irony, wit, unconscious communications such as projective identifications, and so on'* (2009, p. 34). As Ogden states, it is in the experience of writing up case notes that something happens for the first time – bringing to life what occurred at a conscious and unconscious level into relationship with another.

In the above quote, Ogden refers to 'unconscious communications' and it is this aspect that I want to unpick in a little more detail. So far I have described the influence of the researcher's 'inner experience' and his/her personal history on the story being told about the research subject. These ideas draw on the psychoanalytic concepts of 'transference' and 'counter-transference' and it is these examples of unconscious communications that add a more complex layer to the notion of researcher subjectivity. Before examining how these concepts might relate to the research encounter, I will first expand on how they 'look' within the clinical context.

Transference and counter-transference

'Transference' is a key concept first used by Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud and Breuer, 1895) and gradually developed through his clinical experience. It describes the process wherein the patient develops intense feelings, like love, anger or hatred, towards the analyst. These feelings are actually a replay of emotions experienced in relation to an important person from the patient's past – most typically a parent. The patient behaves as if these feelings are legitimately directed towards the analyst and the task of the analyst is therefore to be alert to this, make an interpretation

based on psychoanalytic principles and comment to the patient on what is happening.

Transference is not a phenomenon exclusive to the clinic, for according to Freud, it occurs naturally in the course of everyday life. What the clinic does provide is a particular set of circumstances within which to observe this phenomenon; as Freud put it *“psycho-analysis does not create [transference], but merely reveals it to consciousness and gains control of it to guide psychical processes towards the desired goal”* (1910, p.51). Crucial to this is the ‘passive’ stance of the analyst, in the sense that he/she reveals no details about self, acting more as a ‘sounding board’. It is argued that the analyst can become anyone in the patient’s imagination by being in effect no-one; the patient becomes increasingly frustrated by the fact that the analyst is not responding in the desired way, that is to say, not fulfilling the patient’s longings and as a result transference becomes more highly charged (Frosh, 2002). The reverse aspect of transference is ‘counter-transference’. In the clinical setting this refers to the analyst’s unconscious response to the patient or to significant people in the patient’s life.

A number of psychosocial researchers have applied the concepts of transference and counter-transference to their methodological position on researcher subjectivity. Hunt (1989), for example, describes how the role which the researcher assumes in fieldwork often mobilises transference relationships as a result of its link to unconscious fantasies. Being an outsider to the culture of the organisation under study, for instance, might activate the researcher’s childhood experience of being marginalised in the family. The researcher’s unconscious desire for status or belonging might result in them attempting to gain power or acceptance during the observation or interview. In the following extract Hunt describes her experience of research with the police – a highly gendered and stratified setting:

My status as an unwanted, female outsider appeared to mobilise a number of unconscious issues for me as well as for the police [...] For example, I suspect that the actual experience of being treated as a devalued woman with outsider status linked to deeper issues from my past. These partly revolved around a sense of displacement

which accompanied the birth of my brother and may have been linked to gender. My assumption of an androgynous research role, which combined masculine characteristics admired by police with feminine ones, possibly represented an effort to compete in my family as well as the world of police. By being part boy, I imagined that I could avoid displacement by sibling rivals and gain my father's approval. In this case, the police represented paternal transference figures. (Hunt, 1989, p. 40)

Other researchers draw on an analysis of the transference and counter-transference relationship. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) for example suggest that by attending to the researcher's own feelings during the research encounter, it allows space for thinking about what these feelings might signify about the unconscious communications between the researcher and the research subject. For example, why might the researcher have come away from an interview feeling rather low, even though the interview appeared to go well? What difficult thoughts or feelings might the research subject have been projecting into the researcher? Another example might be the way the researcher wants to protect and look after the research subject – who does the research subject represent to the researcher? Which part of the research subject is the researcher speaking to? Or the topic of discussion might arouse feelings of discomfort, indicating perhaps aspects of knowledge and understanding that the researcher is defending against.

Frosh and Baraitser (2008) argue that the terms 'transference' and 'counter-transference' often become muddled in the research context. In the clinic 'transference' is clearly described as occurring from patient to analyst. The researcher may be in the position of observer, but that does not mean we can assume he/she represents the position of the analyst in the transference relationship. After all, it is the researcher who initiates the research encounter (the analyst would not initiate therapy for the patient). In the revised edition of their book, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) acknowledge the difficulty of distinguishing between transference and counter-transference and suggest it would be better to find an alternative phrase. They put forward Hunt's (1989) 'using (the researcher's) subjectivity as an instrument of knowing' or the simple idea of using one's emotional responses. They provide a clearer distinction between their use of the concept of

'transference' and that of the clinical setting. In the clinic the analyst needs to understand how a person's current emotional responses originate with primary figures at the earliest stages of life in order to advance therapeutic treatment. Empirical research does not share this aim; Hollway and Jefferson believe transference in their research relates to mental material that is much more accessible to thought.

Through my research I have tried to attend to my emotional responses, although I have not concerned myself with working out if these are examples of transference or counter-transference. For example, in chapter four, I describe how I walked away from a group on two occasions, even though I was supposed to be observing them. In the jottings I made afterwards, I wrote about the anger and annoyance that I felt towards these children, on account of their disruptive behaviour and failure to engage in the task as I thought they should. In my analysis I explore how my relationship with the group seemed to be predicated on my desire for power and fear over its loss; it is possible that the ways in which I related to the children might have unconsciously resonated with other relationships and experiences in my life.

If I am wary of using the term 'transference' it is also because I am aware of my inexperience in this area. In reference back to Bick and her method of infant observation, she categorically stated that the observer be under personal analysis, in order to be aware of the counter-transference relationships going on (Rustin, 2009). Whilst I fully recognise my lack of personal experience of psychoanalysis and the limitations therefore on my analysis, I think there is a danger of conversely assuming that experience brings full understanding of the unconscious dynamic. By the very fact that they are 'unconscious' processes, they can only ever be partially known. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) remind us that even when the researcher reveals intimate details about self, such declarations can never be complete enough to understand what his or her contribution to the research process might be, let alone comprehend the way this affects data analysis. What I have tried to do is to begin to explore my defences, anxieties and fantasies in order to unpick the role that I

negotiated during observation and interview and the unconscious processes that might have affected my interpretation and presentation of the data.

Examining the ethics of researching feelings

In exploring the possible unconscious processes that influence an observed or narrated experience, many ethical issues are raised at every level of the research process. My first difficulty was trying to work out how to convey my research intentions to the children when seeking their consent. Given the age of the children (9-10 years), it seemed appropriate to keep my statement of intent very simple: 'I am interested in your experiences of group work and your feelings of working with others'. It was important not to frame the topic too narrowly or make the children feel obliged to respond in a certain way (for example, I did not mention the word 'anxiety' or 'difficulty').

Should the researcher inform research subjects in advance about the experience of the kind of interview, where the discussion might raise difficult and potentially painful issues? Hammersley and Traianou (2012) argue that the nature of certain qualitative methods like open-ended interviews and participant observations means it can be difficult to predict outcomes in advance. The researcher is considered to be working in contexts over which he/she has limited control and the decision to consent cannot always be reduced to a conscious, cognitive process. Finch (1993), however, describes how unstructured interviewing techniques, where there is a strong development of trust, might increase the exploitative potential in the interview situation. When she interviewed clergy wives, she felt that her status as a woman (and also clergy wife) meant the women trusted her with intimate details of their marriages. She writes about the potential to misuse the special relationships she established with these women – *'they have often revealed very private parts of their lives in return for what must be, in the last resort, very flimsy guarantees of confidentiality'* (p.173). I am aware that my relationships with the children had its advantages, but there was a risk that I would exploit the trust they put in me. There were times when they showed vulnerability in talking about sensitive issues; I tried to hold in mind my position of responsibility towards the children and in narrating

their stories I have endeavoured to honour them with my words and show empathy and understanding of their positions in the classroom.

My decision to conduct *group* discussions raises ethical issues about the potential to add to the children's sense of vulnerability, since the children might have feared how group members would judge or respond to statements made. Although a group interview can be considered a constraint on freedom to speak out about sensitive issues, there is the argument that being in a group creates a greater sense of ease, compared to the intense scrutiny of an individual interview. In their research into boys' masculine identity construction, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002) conducted some of their interviews with groups and a number of the boys indeed reported that they preferred the group format, since they found it 'fun' and enjoyed being 'free' with their mates. Certainly in my experience, a couple of the groups spent much of the discussion laughing and joking with each other. There were times, however, when sensitive issues were addressed and I needed to make sure that the children did not become overly distressed. This issue of potential distress for research participants is a complex ethical issue from a psychoanalytic perspective and relates to the idea of 'containing' difficult feelings. I will explore these ideas in some more detail.

Distress and harm

In chapter seven I present a group which included a boy called Bailey. He became upset with a fellow group member, Amanda, during the interview. He was angry with her because he felt that she was not letting him speak (when in fact it appeared very much to be the reverse, in that Amanda was not allowed to have a say in the group). The experience of working with Amanda stirred unconscious processes for Bailey that appeared to relate to envy, love, hate and aggression – typical of elements of sibling rivalry. During the interview he became upset to the point of crying. This immediately raised ethical issues for me and I turned off the recorder and offered him some comfort. Bailey was distressed, but the question is, does this mean he was harmed by the research encounter?

The criterion of avoiding harm is a basic ethical principle (relating to the medical model and implications for health), but is it harmful to experience being upset or distressed? Psychoanalysis challenges the belief that it is best to avoid distress, for example, Frosh (2011) argues that the capacity to 'feel' is what adds to our sense of what it is to be fully human, and this involves the capacity to embrace sorrow and sadness, as well as joy and happiness. This relates to Klein's 'depressive' position, wherein we reconcile ambivalent feelings of love and hate for the same object (see chapter two). From this perspective it could be argued that it is not necessarily harmful if research raises painful and distressing issues, though it may be uncomfortable. Klein's theory, after all, retains a 'redemptive' element through the notion of *reparation* (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008). The suggestion is that by confronting conflicting and ambivalent feelings about an event or person, guilt is often aroused through fear of the damage that might have been caused by one's previous defensive actions; the desire then becomes wanting to make reparation for the past. From this position it could be argued that it is not harming the research subject to talk about distressing issues, but it is the researcher's responsibility to create a safe environment, based on sympathy and respect.

Containment of difficult feelings

Some researchers who use psychoanalytic techniques talk about how the interview context can be used to face *and transform* difficult feelings (e.g. Birch and Miller, 2000), much like the role of therapy. By encouraging respondents to narrate intimate and revealing stories about their personal lives, the resolution and release of previously repressed emotions might lead to potential change. Conflating an interview with a therapeutic encounter raises some serious ethical issues. I am not a therapist and the children I interviewed did not enter into the process under the understanding that it was 'therapy'. They understood that they were helping me with my research. The issue, as I see it, is that we need to be clear about the aim of the research interview and not confuse it with the aim of the therapeutic interview in psychoanalysis. Kvale (1996) states simply the difference as such: a therapeutic encounter is about facilitating changes in the patient and knowledge acquired from the individual patient is a means for instigating these changes; in the research

interview, the purpose is to obtain knowledge of the phenomena investigated and any changes in the participant is a side effect. I was not psychoanalysing the research subjects, but I was drawing on psychoanalytic theory – this is an important distinction (Roseneil, 2006).

There is, however, the possibility of thinking about the concept of ‘containment’³ in relation to the interview. The suggestion is that the respondent might use the defence of projection to get rid of a feeling associated with a painful, difficult idea; the interviewer experiences this projection through ‘empathy’. If the feeling/thought is too painful for the interviewer to bear, then he/she might deny its painfulness, for example, by offering reassurance. If the interviewer can contain the pain, it can be returned ‘detoxified’ and faced as an aspect of reality. In this way, Wendy Hollway, as interviewer, describes how she was able to help a woman called Jane come to terms with a difficult, violent relationship with her partner:

As I contained the painful aspects of Jane’s story, she could increasingly face more of it herself [...] she could remember that it was not that she wanted to die, but that she wanted to be finally rid of him. In my containment of Jane’s painful memories, they became safer to acknowledge, which then also enabled her to feel recognised, to feel that her meanings had been emotionally understood.

(Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 50).

In the revised version of their book, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) argue that the combination of affect and reflection in psycho-social research increases the compassion of the researcher towards research subjects, including those who may not share your values or who you might dislike. They state that sharing data with a supervisor can create a space to help the researcher reflect, when open-ended thinking is in danger of being compromised by anxieties.

In my research context I followed up the children of each group after the observations and discussions, to ensure that they had not been left upset. Sometimes it was to sit next to them in lunch, other times to talk to them in the

³ See chapter two for a description of Bion’s theory of containment.

playground, often it was simply a smile and a wave in the corridor. It was important that I gave them opportunities to add comment about the observation or interview, but mostly it was to reassure them that I was not rejecting them on the basis of what I had seen or heard in the group. It was not my intention directly to bring about change in the way children related to each other in the group, however when children were prepared to talk about the frustrations and difficulties of working with each other, it was important that it was a safe environment in which to do so. Rather than rush in to dismiss their feelings and offer reassurance that everything was actually fine, I tried to empathise with and acknowledge their pain and in some way 'contain' it.

Summary

Through my research I tried to take on board a number of points that have been raised in this chapter. In my observation role, I attempted to be alert to the emotional atmosphere of the group and also the feelings within me that were stirred as a result of being with the group. During the discussions I wanted to elicit narratives from the children about their experience of working together and other occasions of group work; I tried to intervene as little as possible in the conversation and I allowed the topic of discussion to follow the children's lead. Immediately after the observation and discussion I wrote up my thoughts and feelings about the group; I did this without overly attending to the rationality or coherence of what I was writing, since I wanted unconscious impressions to filter through in the sensations and experiences that I put into words. As will be seen over the next four chapters of analysis, I have tried to maintain an overall narrative of each group to help the reader identify with the experience of the groups. This was my first level of analysis. At a second level, I present a close-up view of parts of the data, where I felt that the children's words or actions were psychoanalytically significant according to my theoretical framework. Lastly I have reflected on my own role in the group. In many ways I have drawn on the principles of 'thick description' (Denzin, 1989), to go beyond fact and surface appearances and present '*detail, context, emotion and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another*' (p.83).

The purpose of my research is to provoke and stimulate new ways of thinking about the complexities of collaborative learning. By drawing on psychoanalytic theory, it is possible to think about unconscious anxieties that might circulate in the group and the psychic defences that might be mobilised, particularly the fantasies that we might invest in. Over the next four chapters I focus on a range of difficulties of collaborative learning: having an uninvited member join the group (chapter four); the tensions created by my presence (chapter five); the potential link between family relationships and problems of dependency in the group (chapter six) and finally the ways in which a particular task might have stirred unconscious anxiety. My interpretations are tentative and at times I have explored different ways of thinking about the data. I appreciate that my accounts are highly subjective and open to alternative interpretation; however, my aim has been to be as methodologically and theoretically clear as possible.

Chapter Four

The uninvited member

The fear of being left until last when teams were being picked at school is probably one many of us can identify with. My analysis here will focus on a girl I called Lauren, who was in just this position. The context was a maths lesson with a collaborative problem to solve, whereby the teacher had allowed the class to choose their own groups of three or four to work in. At the teacher's instruction to get themselves into groups there was a frenzy of activity. Children bargained and pleaded with the popular pupils to secure a prized place in their group; some children went to the teacher to ask if they could work as a group of five, to save having to reject a friend; yet others became upset because they were not in the group of their choice. There, in amongst this whirl of activity, stood Lauren. No-one approached her and she did not make advances towards anyone. As everyone settled at their tables the teacher spotted Lauren and placed her with an established group of three girls (Arwa, Malika and Gita). No permission was sought from these girls, neither was Lauren consulted about the situation. And therein Lauren's position in the group was firmly established – the uninvited member.

In this chapter I will tell the story of Lauren's experience in the group, by focussing on the ways in which her presence caused uncertainty amongst group members. I will look at how an outsider in the group caused other group members defensively to try and maintain their own position in the friendship circle. I will then look at Lauren's position more carefully in terms of the balance she faced between confronting and escaping the reality of her situation. I challenge the fantasy that suggests asking children to form groups is an emotion-free process.

How the children dealt with the explicit task

The four girls sat down together around a small table at the back of the classroom that I had chosen. I thought that the audio recording of voices would be assisted, if there was some distance from the noise of the rest of the class. It seems to me now that being right on the margins of the classroom, away from the main arena of

learning and the hubbub of the rest of the class, by the piles of coats on pegs, symbolised well the social and academic position that Lauren occupied. Physical and psychic separations from the rest of the class were something that she was used to. During the four years that I had known her, she typically occupied positions at the margins of classroom life. Without the social or academic status to influence her peers, Lauren lacked friends in school, save for two girls, who also were marginalised by their peers. Not that Lauren fared much better with teachers, for they frequently complained about her lack of ability and effort in lessons, moreover her constant chatting. The fact that she would also talk to herself meant she was characterised by teachers and pupils as slightly 'mad' and 'not normal'.

The task that the class had been set by the teacher was to investigate chains of numbers and to explain the emerging patterns. A number was taken as the starting point and then a rule was applied to generate the next numbers in the chain— *if the number is even you halve it and if the number is odd you add 1*. An example would be a starting number of 18 that then continued with 9, 10, 5, 6, 3, 4, 2 and 1. The children were asked to produce chains for different starting numbers and then see if there was a relationship between length of chain and starting number. Although this was the declared task of the group, it was apparent that the major task that these girls had to cope with was that of trying to work together, whilst being observed by me. From my experience of teaching these girls, I understood them to be pupils who typically wanted to impress and please the teacher. For Arwa and Gita in particular, academic achievement also mattered deeply. As will be seen in the next couple of transcript extracts, the three friends worked hard to appear to give Lauren help.

From the outset the girls decided that they should share out the task so that each person had a chance to work out a 'number chain'. As soon as it was Lauren's turn, the other three competed with each other to give her help, even though she had not requested it.

Gita: Lauren, what do you think? If we have nine what are we going to do?
It's odd, if you remember.

Lauren: I know. If it's odd you have to put an even number next to it.
Gita: No!
Malika: No. You have to add one. Nine add one.
Lauren: Nine add one is ten.
Gita: Super!

Each girl appeared eager to help Lauren. For Gita and Arwa, the assistance they gave was in the form of asking directed questions and taking a 'teacherly' role. Hey (1997) comments that young girls adopt the 'teacher' position as a site of power and indeed Arwa emphasised this position of power by actually leaving her chair to stand over Lauren. Furthermore she 'scaffolded' the task through asking a series of incremental questions. Malika, on the other hand, wanted to just give Lauren the answers, or at least a heavy hint. All of them praised Lauren for the smallest step that she achieved and in this manner infantilised her, treating her like a toddler who was learning to do something for the first time. Lauren did not object to the help that she was given and when it came back around to her turn, she made the following request:

Lauren: So you shout out all the answers to me and I'll write.
Gita: No, no, no. You try to work out the answers and we'll have time. Yeah?
Arwa: Twelve. What's half of twelve?
Lauren starts to work it out. [...]
Gita: So what's half of six?
Lauren: Half of six?
Malika gives her the answer
Gita: Don't Malika!
Arwa: Don't Malika!
Malika: Ok. Sorry, sorry.
Arwa: OK, what do you do now?
Malika: Add one, add one.
Arwa: Malika! (*Then to Lauren*) Is three odd or even?
Lauren: Three is odd.
Arwa: Ok. Now what do you have to do when three is odd? (*Lauren writes four*).
Well done

Malika: Perfect.
Arwa: Malika!
Malika: Look, I'm not telling her the answers, thank you very much.
Arwa: Well, but you don't tell her.

Lauren seemed happy to be fed the answers. Just like the child who is spoon fed by the mother, perhaps she wanted to be in a position where she did not have to take any responsibility for herself. But maybe it was not the answers that she really craved. If others were prepared to 'nourish' her, then it could mean that they cared for her and thus she enjoyed the sense of approval and attention that she gained from them. Certainly Malika was prepared to oblige in this way. The other two, however, were insistent that this was not an appropriate way to help; they were trying to encourage Lauren to feed herself, as it were.

What struck me was the seriousness around helping Lauren, with complaints to Malika when she was helping in the 'wrong' way and yet the levity with which the three girls approached their own turns in working through the maths task. Gita, for example, laughed as she worked out her number string, whilst Malika played upon a 'scatty' and absent-minded persona when she struggled to recall simple number facts, causing the others to giggle. Arwa and Gita gently teased her 'Don't you know! Oh, come on Malika, work it out.' Certainly there was no offer of help, as there had been for Lauren, who was positioned as knowing nothing. In casting Malika's knowledge in a different light to Lauren's, the group seemed to reinforce the infantilisation of Lauren. Laughing at Malika's mathematical weakness was perhaps a way of saying to her 'look it really doesn't matter' and encouraging her to continue. The earnest act of helping Lauren was therefore split from the rest of the task, so that the outcomes of their own efforts did not need to be judged too seriously. Perhaps that way the three girls could maintain that it was Lauren who needed the help, not them.

In many ways the group were able to focus on the task and there were elements of a *work group* state. This position, however, was tentatively balanced with a basic assumption group of *dependency*, where Lauren was positioned as the needy one

even though she had not asked for help. One interpretation is that by creating a situation of dependency, where Lauren started to rely on the other girls, they could control the situation and minimise the academic and social risks that Lauren brought to the group. An alternative interpretation is that they projected into Lauren the sense of need and helplessness that circulated around the group. Perhaps the collective fear of being left outside the group manifested itself in exaggerated positions of dependency. A different interpretation yet is that these three friends wanted to please the teacher (and me) by maintaining the fantasy that the group could 'magic' away Lauren's problems. If Lauren was made to feel part of the group, then perhaps as a class we would not have to think about the reality of her pain of loneliness and rejection and we could forget the image of her standing on her own.

After the task, the class were called to sit together on the carpet to go through the solutions. The teacher filled in a chart on the white board, showing different number strings, which led into a discussion about whether there was a relation between starting number and length of number string. During this class discussion Lauren focussed on copying down from the board every single number string. Afterwards she described her actions to me:

Lauren: I took my time and I wrote all of that.

RE: Why did you do that Lauren?

Lauren: Um, because I really wanted to improve myself, just to get myself tired again because mostly I like to do a lot of writing and I looked on the board because I was so into concentrating I can't really explain. I was concentrating on you, because I was focusing on the board and I was just like that, I was just writing, I didn't even know what I was doing. I was just writing and I just looked at it and I went oh what did I do?

Lauren's desire to 'improve' herself, to concentrate hard and focus on the board could be read as an act of reparation, to make up for the times during the group session when she let others do the work for her and lacked purposeful intent towards the task. Perhaps she wanted to show me that she could appreciate the

'goodness' that comes from learning maths and therefore bring me, the teacher, pleasure. But Roberts (1994) notes that reparation at times can be manic, rather than genuine, in that it can be impractical and ineffective. I do not believe that Lauren learnt anything new about the task in copying down figures from the board, but her total absorption in this action was a way of 'magically' repairing the situation - 'I didn't even know what I was doing'. Perhaps then she did not have to think too much about her anxieties or guilt over the experience of learning maths and being in a group?

After the lesson the five of us went in search of a room to have a discussion together. No room for us could be found – an echo of originally no room for Lauren in any group. We ended up clearing a space for ourselves in the art room; there in amongst the accumulation of art materials and children's work we sat around a large table, which seemed to exaggerate the distance between each of us. The rest of this chapter is concerned with the group discussion during this time.

Anxiety of being outside the group

Lauren's outsider status to the group might have been influenced by her white British ethnicity that the others did not share. Ethnic identification involves a complex convergence of discourses around 'race', religion, gender or sexuality and social class (Archer 2011) and so I do not want to suggest that ethnicity is represented by a fixed position. It is possible, however, that ethnicity might have been part of marking out what it meant to belong to the friendship group, in that the other, non-white girls might be thought of as splitting off 'unwanted' aspects of self and projecting these into Lauren, to construct defensive boundaries between them and her (Lucey, 2010). If Lauren was constructed as 'other', it was perhaps complicated by the fact that her ethnic position was institutionally the hegemonic cultural one (most of the teachers were white British). Hey (1997) writes that girls are heavily involved in making their friendship groups a version of 'being normal', which can only be understood through its opposite - the *girl* not to be. Perhaps Lauren represented a position of institutional power they desired and yet her reputation for being 'not normal' meant her position was probably repudiated.

Malika was a popular girl in the class and in my experience it was typically her friendship that many of the other girls wanted to secure. Arwa and Gita seemed to have to work hard to maintain their places within her friendship group. But Malika did not wield the power that came with popularity in any obvious sense, having an apparently polite, cheerful and helpful disposition. As seen in the task, for example, she was keen to help Lauren by giving her the answers, whilst laughing about her own mathematical inadequacies. But the forced inclusion of Lauren in the group appeared to add uncertainty and anxiety for Arwa and Gita about their own friendship with Malika.

George and Brown (2000) have researched girls' friendships in the primary school and found that the negotiation of 'who is in and who is out' of the inner circle of friends involves much emotional work. They showed the complex, internal dynamics of friendship and how groups are not constructed on the basis of mutual trust but on the basis of domination, as the leader exerts emotional power over the other members of the group. The leader has the luxury of being able to pick and choose their best friends and it is this sense of insecurity amongst the peer group, as to whether they are in or out, that enables the leader to maintain control over the group. What is interesting is that this power is often cloaked through a presentation of self as being unassuming, modest, reliable and helpful. This research supports the work of Valerie Hey (1997) and her exploration of the friendship groups of older girls. The underlying emotional investments that are involved in friendship groups may go unnoticed to the outsider, but to the girls themselves, there is much anxiety about being left out and the experience of exclusion can be deeply distressing.

The first part of the discussion was dominated by Arwa, who talked at length about the fun that she had when working with friends, and their tendency to laugh and giggle, which she acknowledged was not always conducive to getting the task done. It appeared to me that her emphasis on the enjoyment aspect of group work was an appeal to Malika (and Gita?) about the value that she brought to the group. It was as if she was saying 'You need me in your group. I'm fun to be around'. Malika agreed

with Arwa that it was fun to work with friends, but she left an element of uncertainty over who might be in this friendship group. This extract from the discussion starts with the ambiguous line 'now I have like even more friends':

- Malika: *(addressing my question about her experience of the group)*
And now I have even like more friends. Like I have, like mostly Lauren is my friend but mostly I play with Gita and Arwa so now it's a bit like before when we were doing our work. It's more like fun.
- Gita: You laugh a lot. It's funny
- Arwa: because, because you spend more time with them
- Malika: You get them
- Arwa: Sometimes we do relax outside, yeah and we do things together [...]That's why I'm quite used to Malika because, because actually I don't commonly work with Lauren

I wonder to what extent Arwa felt threatened by Lauren being in the group. After all Malika had stated that 'mostly Lauren is my friend'. Through this short exchange between the girls, Arwa appeared to want to strengthen her alliance with Malika in order to secure an 'inside' position and simultaneously ensure Lauren was left 'outside', or at least on the periphery. Alternatively, perhaps she was afraid of being left outside with Lauren, if she was seen to identify too closely with her. Hey (1997) argues that girls have a particular expertise in manipulating sites of power amongst their own sex because they have often have first-hand experience of struggling to maintain positions of power against boys. She suggests that this is nowhere more evident than when girls relate to those on the margins of a friendship group.

As the discussion developed it struck me that Arwa and Gita continued to try to position Lauren as 'other' to the rest of them. We began talking about helping others in the group and whether it was more appropriate to guide someone through a task or give them the answers. The spotlight turned to Malika, who had wanted to provide Lauren with the latter kind of help. Gita and Arwa seemed intent on

'poisoning' the motive for this help and thus rendering it toxic. It seemed to me that they wanted to make it clear to Lauren that Malika was not actually her friend:

Lauren: It was very kind of her (*referring to Malika*).

Gita: I think Malika was tempted to tell her the answer. Sometimes people get tempted, they actually want to tell the answer. They get annoyed when they have to wait, so they just give the answer.

Arwa: Yeah, that's what I was thinking

Lauren: Is that what happened? Because I don't know which one it was.

Malika: Yeah, Gita's point.

Lauren: (*whispered*) I'm going to vomit now.

Gita and Arwa turned the motivation for help from something 'kind' and 'nice' to something which was fuelled by annoyance in having to wait for Lauren to work out the answers. Lauren was bothered by this remark and asked which the true reason was: kindness or frustration? When Malika sided with Gita's point (i.e. frustration), Lauren's response was startling – she wanted to vomit. I almost missed this comment on the recording, for it was quietly spoken by Lauren as an aside to herself, whilst the conversation carried on. The goodness of Malika's help that she had taken in, ingested, had turned into something bad that she had to expel and be rid of. According to Klein (Segal, 1992), the mother brings satisfaction with the flow of milk, yet there are times when the mother's body and milk are absent or lacking, causing the infant to then believe it is a hateful breast. It seems that Lauren had taken in the goodness of Malika's support, but then she was presented with a 'bad' side to this help; unable to reconcile both positive and negative parts, she had to rid herself of what she could now only see as toxic. From Malika's perspective, perhaps she had shown agreement with Gita in that moment because she feared that the expectation to 'provide' for Lauren would extend beyond the group session and become too great a burden.

Lauren had faced an assault from 'reality' when Arwa and Gita had turned Malika's kindness into something toxic. During the discussion, she reflected on another occasion when the desire to help and be helped could make you feel worthless and

unwanted. She was talking about a new girl in the class, Zainab, who she had tried to approach with an offer of help:

Lauren:she's rude to me and that, but she does wind me up a little bit because you know when you are talking to her, you're trying to get her to engage, she's like 'oh no, I don't need your help. I've already got Arwa's help' or whoever else her friends are. I say 'Arwa's helping another group, she's really busy'. She goes 'no I still want Arwa' and everything and I was like 'no Arwa's there' so I have to try.

RE: Did it bother you that she wanted Arwa and not you?

Lauren: *(laughs)* Oh, I could have killed myself. I just felt like I was going to *(mimes the action of strangling herself)*, so I could faint on the floor, so that I could get away from school for a few days. Hee, hee.

In this situation, Lauren put herself in a vulnerable position, through offering help to this new girl. Zainab needed help – she just did not want it from Lauren, preferring to wait to receive it from Arwa. When I asked if this bothered her, she laughed, a defensive action perhaps to suggest that it did not matter. Her words however, revealed something different. As she laughed, she said that she could have killed herself. Not only had she been rejected, but there was perhaps the envy of Arwa being chosen over her. Certainly she wanted to end the pain that was too much to bear – kill herself, faint, leave school, whatever it took to be able to not feel what she was feeling and thus deaden the pain. The association of this anecdote to our discussion appeared to me to indicate that Lauren understood her outsider status in the group. Zainab had not wanted her goodness or her friendship and, it appears, neither did this group.

Between sanity and madness

Writing in '*Second Thoughts*', Bion (1967) stated that each of us has both psychotic and non-psychotic parts to our personality. Many who seek treatment through psychoanalysis tend to be those who predominantly have psychotic thought

processes and defences. They might display a withdrawal from reality, talking in ways that sound like ‘madness’ to the rest of us. But even people who are predominantly non-psychotic still have the potential for psychotic thoughts. There might be a part of us that does not want to think about reality and to tolerate learning from experience. Bion posited that mental health is predicated on a kind of balance between the psychotic and non-psychotic parts of our personality. I mention this theory because Lauren’s experience of being in the group seemed to reflect this balance between escaping and confronting reality. We have already seen the ways in which she was seemingly made to face the reality of her situation – being told that Malika’s help was not out of kindness, for example. In this section I want to consider how she might have tried to block out this pain.

In the following extract Arwa was continuing to talk about the importance of having fun in the group, but she warned of the dangers when this could distract from work. Arwa and Malika were constructing the idea that an excess of fun could cause people to become ‘hyper’. Interested in this idea, I was trying to ask the question about how to stop the goodness of fun tipping into the madness of being hyper, but I was repeatedly interrupted by Lauren. This is how the rather disjointed discussion unfolded:

- Arwa: ...I like having fun with my friends, while we’re learning as well, because we could have fun at the same time, but not have too much fun because that
- Malika: /people get hyper
- Arwa: Yeah
- RE: How do you stop yourselves from
- Lauren: /Just fly out of the window and get an alarm clock
- RE: In what ways can you stop your, can you keep it
- Lauren: /Forget they’re even there
- RE: hold a reign on your
- Lauren: / Forget they’re there and do your work (*laughs*)
- Arwa: Well in the beginning make a deal, like we, the thing that we, the way that we concentrate together is have a bit of a laugh but mostly concentrate on the work, because if we have a long, long laugh, like Lauren says fly out the

window

Lauren: [...] you'll be just be like forget they're there and just start doing the work and if they're blabbering on about you, and you're like sorry, I'm just doing this. You're like, excuse me I'm trying to work here and they're just keep babbling on about whatever you're talking about. Sometimes they're mad, talking to themselves and you're not talking to them.

Lauren's enigmatic comment about flying out of the window and getting an alarm clock could be interpreted in many ways. Certainly there is the element of fantasy that one is able to escape from reality, fly out of the room and enjoy the freedom of the skies. This could be read as a wish to get away vertically from an unbearable horizontal existence. Perhaps her position up in the sky is symbolic of her desire to be 'looking down' on the others from a 'higher' position. As for the alarm clock – is this a reminder that one must at some stage awake from this dreamlike state and return to reality? This comment from Lauren about flying away strikes me that there is a desire to evade reality, to not have to think about her position in the group of not being wanted or valued. Ogden's (2009) warning of the illusory state of a magical world reminds us of the danger that Lauren faced – what if the alarm clock never signalled to her to wake from this dream like state? What if she remained trapped in a world without any bearing on reality and therefore could not learn or develop? What if her dream thus turned into a nightmare?

Within this extract, Lauren three times mentioned forgetting the group. She imagined a group where she could ignore everyone else and just get on with her work. Perhaps she had not wanted the teacher to put her in a group; maybe she would have preferred to have worked on her own. Was this a desire and fantasy within – to be beyond the vulnerable position of needing anyone? Or was this a reflection of how she had felt during the task – the others were blabbering on about her, fussing about the best way to help her, yet addressing her as if she was invisible. Not once did they actually ask her whether she wanted their help, nor had they enquired as to the specific form of help that she required. Neither had the teacher asked her about what she wanted, but assumed that she knew what was best for Lauren by putting her to work with the girls.

In describing how she wanted to get on with her work, Lauren was constructing her capability and self-sufficiency against the blabbering madness of others in the group. She portrayed the others as 'mad' – 'talking to themselves' even when 'you're not talking to them'. Was this a case of projection, in that she wanted to split off the mad thoughts that crowded her mind and locate this madness in others? Or did she want to punish the others by telling them that she was ignoring them, obliterating their maddening presence from her mind?

Lauren mentioned this idea of ignoring the presence of another again, later in the discussion, but this time in relation to me. I was asking her the question of whether she felt part of the group. It might have seemed a fair question to ask, given the situation, but in effect I was unfairly re-inscribing her position as an outsider:

RE: Did you feel part of the group?

Lauren: Yeah.....First time I was really nervous because I get upset sometimes, um...

RE: Tell me a bit more.

Lauren: Um, like say for example you, you were my partner and let's say you were about my age as well and you were my partner and you were just talking and talking and I was going nuts. I would say 'Be quiet!' but I just ignored you and then I started work and you're like 'ah sorry, was I boring you?' and I'd be like 'yeah, man you keep just keep talking' and then I just like tell them to 'come on let's get on with it'. Say you were just talking like 'na, na, na' and I've gone 'carry on' and then Arwa comes over obviously and says 'what are you talking about? It's maths time, it's not chat time'. I can't really explain how this happens.

In the scenario that Lauren portrays, it is me who is the annoying partner, who does not stop talking and with whom she has to find a way of working. She is trying to concentrate on the task and is 'going nuts' over my incessant chatter. Her response is to ignore me and then to try and encourage me into the task. But Arwa, the teacher, comes over and tells us off. This could be interpreted as splitting and

projection, to disown the negative aspects of self – the chatting and lack of concentration. In splitting off the ‘bad’ pupil from self and locating these negative traits in me, she could experience the difficulties as belonging to someone else and therefore avoid having to think about herself occupying this position. Another interpretation is that she wanted to punish me in the same way as the others, for I was as culpable as the three girls in marginalising her position in the group. To treat me as a pupil was to strip me of my significance as a teacher and to infantilise me in the same manner that she had been.

I know that I did not find this discussion easy. I had noted in my journal that I was dissatisfied with my contributions that day and how I struggled to think of useful questions or indeed take seriously the occasion. I remember sitting there with these girls and thinking that I was not concentrating sufficiently, that I was wasting the opportunity. I now wonder if my inability to keep in touch with my train of thought was because I was unconsciously participating in Lauren's evasion of thinking.

Later during the discussion, Lauren got up to leave the table:

Lauren decided to help some girls, who came to empty the recycling bin and another time she went to the back of the room to wash her hands. On neither occasion did she ask or indicate that she was momentarily leaving the group – that's assuming she ever actually felt part of it. (Journal entry)

The tasks that she left the group to perform are very interesting. Emptying the bin and washing her hands were actions of getting rid of rubbish and dirt, of emptying and cleansing. Do we read this as the acts of the penitent sinner wanting to be made pure again? Or do we interpret her actions as her desire to purge herself of the group – ‘wiping her hands’ of us. The group had marginalised her and now she was defiantly ridding herself of us. Maybe the most menial and trivial of tasks seemed better than staying in the group and herein she was achieving something more worthwhile.

I was annoyed with Lauren during the discussion. Un-picking this feeling of annoyance is not easy. Perhaps I was frustrated by the ways in which she stripped me of my power, both in her actions of leaving the group (without asking me) and in her words: *'let's say you were about my age as well and you were my partner'*. Lauren's response to me seemed to highlight the tension that I felt in occupying an uneasy space of being both teacher and researcher (as I wrote about in the previous chapter). If I was her teacher, then she understood that permission would need to be sought before walking away from a group session; as a researcher, I wanted to give more power to the children.

Perhaps at an unconscious level Lauren wanted me to feel her annoyance. In interpreting the possible transference relationship between me and Lauren, maybe she was eliciting this feeling in me, because she wanted me to feel the frustration that she felt but could not speak about. Another interpretation is that it was me who was transferring this feeling of annoyance into Lauren because she represented a part of me that I could not deal with. Maybe I was splitting off and denying the bit of me that struggles to confront issues, because of the fear of rejection. Perhaps I blamed Lauren for not finding the solutions to her isolation. If only she fought back, got cross with the others, or put them more firmly in their place. Had she failed to provide the hope that I needed for myself?

Concluding thoughts

As a teacher I often devolve responsibility for the organisation of groups to the children. I tell them to find their own partner or group to work with, for my understanding is that the quality of collaboration is often better when between friends (as reported in research, e.g. Barnes and Todd, 1977). Like the teacher in this chapter, we expect children to be able to establish groups quickly, easily and without any fuss. The underlying fantasy appears to be that forming groups is a trouble-free, emotion-free process. If children, like Lauren, are left with no-one to work with, then teachers slot them into groups without a second thought to what that child or the receiving group might be feeling. What I hope to have illuminated through the story of this group is the resulting anxiety about what it means to

belong. It might be anxiety about feeling like you 'fit in' and have 'insider' status, or it might be anxiety in the face of the terror of dependency. These are themes that I will return to in the last chapter.

Chapter Five

To invade or to settle?

In this chapter I want to explore the difficulties that I and the children experienced in relation to my role in the group. The nature of a professional doctorate is that it involves conducting research within one's own institution. It is acknowledged that the role of researcher in addition to that of colleague can be awkward for all concerned and present any number of ethical issues – for example, the vulnerability of participants and the use of findings (Robson, 2002). For me there was the possible conflict between my roles as teacher and as researcher, made more complex by the interpellation of my position as an ex-school girl. The aspect of insider research that I focus on here is the potential unconscious anxiety that this conflict and confusion might mobilise.

The group that I present in the chapter were given a history task that they found too ambiguous and open-ended and they struggled to achieve the outcome that the teacher desired. As someone who regularly taught them on other occasions, I felt that they were looking to me as a teacher to help them and give advice. In that moment I decided that as a researcher, it was not appropriate to intervene. I was investing in the fantasy that led me to believe I could make this clear distinction between my two roles and that my detachment would benefit my research and not affect the children emotionally. I want to suggest that my actions created a pool of unconscious anxiety within the group and led to basic assumption behaviour that focused on these children finding another leader upon whom they could depend.

Significant to my analysis are obviously my own feelings and unconscious responses within the group. I show aspects of myself of which I am not proud, bits that I would rather hide from the reader. In the act of translating the data into an academic account, there is a part of me who wishes to imagine that I can separate the formal narrative of the research encounter from my own subjective responses, to gloss over my intrusions that could be interpreted in a negative way. The anxiety over how I will be judged by the research community leads to the desire to split off the 'bad'

data and keep it hidden from public view, in order to present only that which is considered to be 'good' data. This act of self-censoring, however, only serves to perpetuate the fantasy and myth of the objective, detached researcher (Walkerdine, 1997).

How the children dealt with the explicit task

This was a history lesson that was part of the class topic on Romans in Britain. The teacher had set a collaborative task that involved each group studying copies of photographs of Roman archaeological remains that had been discovered in the UK. From these images, each group had to debate and reach a consensus on which archaeological finds gave the strongest evidence that the intention of the Romans was to invade (for example, photographs of weapons that suggested their invading power) and which showed their intention to settle (examples included images of Roman roads and elaborate villas, which indicated investment in the land). The children had to provide written reasons for their choices.

The class teacher had decided that the children were to work in their 'table' groups, that is, the established places in the class that they sat in for much of the day. Prior to this lesson, a pupil called Aaliyah had asked if it could be her turn to take part in the research. I was pleased by her request since in the classroom she often found it difficult to engage with learning and the behaviour she presented was sometimes challenging. I think I equated her interest in my research as a willingness to learn; my research had the potential to be 'good' for her. Perhaps I even took her request to mean that she liked me and from this I could feel good about myself. So it came to be that I chose to observe her and the rest of her table group – her best friend Shanise, along with two boys, Mahad and Jarek.

The group started well, with each member engaged and committed to accomplishing the aim of the task. They were looking at an image of the remains of a Roman castle:

Mahad: I think that one. It's a fort so I think that they must have wanted to

defend because

Shanise: /They had that land.

Mahad: They probably wanted the land

Shanise: Yes

Mahad So those other people, tried to

Shanise: /Tried to destroy it

Mahad: Tried to kill all of the Romans because they were invading Britain.

Aaliyah: I think they wanted to build this around it to stop the people who were trying to attack, to like get in to where they were trying to like settle.

Jarek: They could have made it a bit more higher because they could throw arrows on them.

Having made this promising start, the group began to flick through the other photographs, in a rather desultory fashion. The task was so clearly defined – find the images that showed the strongest evidence of the Roman’s desire to settle; herein the teacher wanted to encourage debate amongst the group. However, it was a struggle to draw a distinctive line between ‘settling’ and ‘invading’. For example, Mahad argued that a picture of a set of marbles, might have been used by the Romans to pass the time as they travelled, but Shanise joked that equally they could have sat down to play a game while they settled in their homes. It was difficult to think in such clear-cut, binary terms, moreover to come up with reasons for choosing one photograph over another. Understandably, the group were beginning to flounder with a task that was both ambiguous and open-ended.

Perhaps at this stage the group were hoping that I would rescue them from their difficulties. As a teacher, they held certain expectations of me. In normal classroom circumstances, the teacher would usually intervene when the group starts struggling, perhaps with some words of advice or a demonstration of how to proceed. I did not fulfil this role and so the group became imbued with what I sensed to be increased agitation and frustration. I wonder now whether the difficulties in trying to decide whether an image represented an intention to invade or settle in some way reflected the group’s difficulty in trying to work out whether I

was there to help them settle as a group or as a threat to them, invading their space with my presence and exposing weaknesses in their defences.

Mahad tried to repair the situation, by taking firm control of the group:

- Mahad: *(picks up a picture of a mosaic floor)* I think the same ideas that I had for that, I think we should have for this too.
- Aaliyah: *(selects a different picture)* I like this picture
- Mahad: We're not talking about that one
- Aaliyah: *(Laughs)* I think
- Mahad: /I think if they weren't here to stay they wouldn't have made a mosaic
- Jarek: They wouldn't make it for no reason because they're in war, they shouldn't be thinking of just that
- Aaliyah: I think this was burnt because half of it is burnt
- Mahad: No I think it's broken

In chapter two I outlined Bion's theory about basic assumption behaviour in the dependent group. The leader upon whom the group depend is idealised; all hope is invested in him/her to bring safety and security to group members. But a leader in the dependent group cannot possibly fulfil the expected role; disappointment and hostility begin to develop in the group and eventually the group will dismiss one leader and appoint another in his/her place, only for the next leader to face a similar fate. In some ways this seems to be what happened with this group. I failed to support the group through its difficulties of interpreting the task and working collaboratively. It appears that Mahad attempted to become the next leader, but he soon found himself being deposed by the other group members, particularly Shanise and Aaliyah. The girls gave up trying to join in sensibly and instead started treating the task as a joke, making fun of what Mahad and Jarek were saying. They laughed about everything and anything; most of the time it was not apparent what was the cause of their giggling. Mahad got cross with the girls and complained about their failure to take the task seriously. Perhaps he was also annoyed with the lack of supportive reception to his initiative of taking control of the group. Underlying it all,

maybe the disruptive behaviour of the girls was actually unconsciously intended to annoy and frustrate me, the original problem leader.

As I have already indicated, my ability to act and take control was complicated, for whilst I was a teacher, here I was in the position of researcher. Shaw (1995) talks about how teacher behaviour is often guided by the fear of loss of power and of descent into chaos; a way of coping with this fear is to resort to some fantasy of omnipotence – ‘I have power to make you do what I want’. If I had been solely in the role of teacher in this lesson, Shanise and Aaliyah’s incessant giggling and failure to focus on the task would doubtless have resulted in me taking swift action to reassert order over chaos. As a researcher I could not act in this way. The desire for omnipotence, however, was still there and my frustration spilled over into unnecessarily hurrying the children along and intentionally foreclosing any further group discussion or negotiation:

- RE: Which three pictures are you going to choose?
- Aaliyah: The villa. I think we should definitely choose the villa
- RE: Choose the villa. OK.
- Mahad: I’m choosing this one.
- RE: The floor, the villa. OK.
- The children start sorting back through the pictures*
- Mahad: Actually that’s a bit boring.... Aah, that is a villa though, a roman villa.
- Aaliyah: We’ve got to have three.
- Mahad: I think we should have a road, a road, then a villa and a fort
- RE: A fort, a road and a villa

The task required that the group recorded reasons for their choices. At this point I was distracted by a boy working in another group and I went over to him to ask him to be quiet. Probably this boy was not the actual problem. I suspect it was me who was the distraction to this group, the one who had created their sense of discomfort that meant they could not focus on the task. I was seemingly splitting off my own anxiety about being with them, projecting into this boy the distracting behaviour that was my own. It is small wonder that the group could not settle back into

learning together, for I was showing my frustration and disappointment by hurrying them along, walking away and presumably giving off non-verbal expressions that matched my feelings. Having returned to the group, I could not bear to observe for much longer and a few minutes later I left them again. I went to talk to the class-teacher about how much longer she thought might be given over to the task.

What can be read into my action of twice walking away from the group and leaving them? I wonder if it was because this group experience was not all that I had imagined it would be. Aaliyah was not taking it seriously, but instead was laughing and giggling. I was on the receiving end of the same disruptive behaviour that she showed other teachers. I was not special after all; I did not have the 'magical' power to change her ways. Bion (1961) talks about the disappointment that group members felt under his 'leadership' and the desire they probably felt to leave the group – to walk away just as I did:

We must recognise now that a crisis has been reached, in that members may well have discovered that membership of a group in which I am a member happens to be an experience that they do not wish to have. In that way we have to face frankly that members of our group may need to leave, in exactly the same way as a person might wish to leave a room which had been entered under a mistaken impression. (Bion, 1961, p. 37)

Richardson (1975) argues that the ultimate test of any member's ability to take the group's feelings of discomfort or hostility, whether this member is the teacher or one of the pupils, is his/her willingness to stay in the group. I showed myself unwilling to stay and help contain the difficulties and frustrations of this group. As an adult, I was in the position of being able to walk away from the group, but the children could not do this. They had to stay. I wonder now what the psychic implications were of my action of walking away from a group. As teachers we have a duty of care and responsibility for these children and in abandoning them, we perhaps re-awaken the primitive fear of the loss of the supporting mother. Perhaps they felt unworthy of my attention or unloved or unacceptable in my sight.

This group experience was doubtless not the one that these four children had hoped for either and since they could not walk away from the group, it seemed different means of distraction had to be found. Whilst I was away Mahad started to 'play fight' with Shanise and Aaliyah. They tried kicking each other under the table. He picked up the tape-recorder and laughed into it. Aaliyah took it from him; over and over she sang the line 'we will, we will rock you' from the *Queen* song '*We Will Rock You*' (May, 1977). These lines seemed loaded with significance. One interpretation is that Aaliyah and the others were intent on 'rocking' me, for I had frustrated them. Perhaps they wanted to destabilise my position – shake me from the space that I occupied and thus launch an invasive attack. An alternative reading is that Aaliyah wanted to rock me, in terms of the action of a cradle and herein there was the unconscious sense that I (and the rest of the group) needed to be comforted and soothed. It was an expression perhaps of her desire to see the group settle down and enjoy a period of peace and stability. We were back to original question: to invade or to settle?

The difficulties of discussing feelings

The group had struggled during the task and in the discussion that we had together straight afterwards, the problems persisted. In this section I will focus on the efforts of Mahad in trying to speak about some of his frustrations of being in the group and the careful path that he was required to tread in doing so. I will also look at how his suggestions disturbed the group, me included, and appeared to mobilise defensive behaviour to avoid dealing with these difficult thoughts.

I introduced the session with the words '*we've got this time together now and it's really a chance for us to think back about working together as a group, what your feelings were about it, how you found it*', to which Aaliyah's response was '*Can I tell lies?*'. She then went on to say how much she had enjoyed the whole group experience. How do we read this question from Aaliyah? Did she want to punish me, by jeopardising the intentions of my research? Or did she want to maintain some kind of illusion and fantasy that everything had been fine? Perhaps her request to tell lies was a fear of what would happen if we started speaking the truth. The

group had hardly been able to cope with trying to complete a history task, let alone speak candidly about feelings.

Mahad brought up the difficulties he had experienced in the group and complained about the fact that Shanise and Aaliyah were constantly laughing – *'It interrupted what me and Jarek were saying. I think that me and Jarek were the only ones that were not laughing'*. This appears at odds with the fact that towards the end of the task, he also had laughed deliberately into the tape recorder. As he spoke Aaliyah and Shanise started giggling. They tried to suppress their giggles, but one look at each other and they spluttered into the next wave of laughter. Mahad appealed to Shanise:

Mahad: Shanise you have to stop laughing now. This is kind of

Aaliyah: /Offensive

Mahad: Serious.

Aaliyah's use of the word 'offensive' strikes me as interesting. Whilst the word can be taken to mean that the laughter was rude and impolite, we can also interpret it in a metaphorical sense – the laughter was an aggressive, attacking action. Here we could surmise that Aaliyah was indeed using laughter as an offensive weapon. Was she rallying the group into a basic assumption of fight (Bion, 1961), where laughter was used to destroy the enemy? (The enemy being perhaps Mahad, the task, or me). Or was she warning the group of imminent attack and leading them in a basic assumption of flight? Maybe she sensed that the group was not going to survive without recourse to an action that would distract them from the dangers surrounding them.

I asked them what they were laughing about (assuming that a reason was consciously known), but it was Mahad who gave a reason:

Mahad: I think I know actually because it's like, it's hard to explain, it's like a group and like and there's a tape recorder there as well and I think it kind of affects your behaviour if you get, say if like, like for a day or two like we got

to play a video game, say, I bet everybody would be laughing and being excited.

RE: So you think that the tape recorder affected you?

Mahad: /yeah and you like being here. If nobody like, if the teacher wasn't here with us, there wouldn't be like

RE: If I hadn't been there observing you as a group, how do you think you would have got on as a group?

Mahad: Much more better, probably. That's what I think anyway.

Few of us like being observed at close-range and certainly not with a tape-recorder and I understand that these aspects disturbed the group. But what if there was more to it than the off-putting presence of an observer? Perhaps Mahad was annoyed with me for failing to control the disruptive behaviour of the girls; maybe he longed for me to establish myself as the authoritarian figure (after all that is what teachers normally do) and bring order to the chaos. Maybe he was cross with me for putting him in the position where he felt he had to take authority, only then to experience failure.

The more that Mahad insisted that he and Jarek were the only ones to take the task seriously, the more Aaliyah and Shanise tried to expose his weaknesses. They pointed to the fact that when I left the group he also laughed and started 'mucking about'. Perhaps they were keen to show that he also had not fulfilled the requirements of group leader. Through these exchanges, Jarek remained very quiet. He had been reticent to join in during the task also, and I was painfully aware of his discomfort in the group. He wanted to change the discussion and move away from the argument that was developing over who had been chiefly responsible for the laughter:

Jarek: I thought we were supposed to talk about how we were doing and that.

Shanise: Not an argument over laughing.

Aaliyah: But not about our issues.

Mahad: This is my feelings, though. This is my feelings.

Aaliyah: Yes, but you don't need to express your feelings.

Mahad: Yeah, but you do though here in this session, in this session.

Aaliyah: Yeah, but maybe you could keep them to yourself

Shanise: /You said express your feelings how you felt during the activity

Mahad: Yeah, this is the whole point of this.

Aaliyah: Because if you express your feelings you are going to get in an argument

Mahad: But this is the whole point of this.

Aaliyah: We're supposed to be learning about History. (*Shanise laughs*)

Mahad: No, the whole point of this session is basically how we felt. It's like when doctors they monitor a baby and kind of look at, they give it some toys, like a test, not really a test, but like they give a baby a book

Aaliyah: /you're now comparing me to a baby

Mahad: I'm just saying like

Shanise: Aaliyah, stop now, seriously

Aaliyah: He's comparing me to a baby and a toy

Mahad: OK, OK, let me say something else like. It's like testing what happens with a car crash. They get a dummy and then they drive the car and then they crash it into like a pole or something and they just see what they need to change.

Aaliyah was clear that they should not be discussing their issues or expressing their feelings; such matters should be kept to oneself. It seemed that she continued to use jokes and laughter to lead the group in flight from discussing weightier issues, for example, the intensity of being together as a group while being observed. It appears, however, that Mahad did want to address this particular issue. Perhaps feeling constrained by the group culture and mentality, he spoke in metaphorical language to convey his feelings. The first metaphor was of a doctor testing a baby, the second of a simulated car crash. It is worth exploring these in more detail, since it appears that there is much that can be learned about how he was feeling.

Mahad's use of metaphor appears to hint at how he perceived my role in the group. His first example was a doctor monitoring a baby, observing the infant while it plays with a toy or looks at a book. My interpretation is that the doctor represented me and the baby stood for the group. I was observing their behaviour, but it was in some false, clinical context that had been set-up and the purpose of this observation

was some kind of test to further my own agenda. Aaliyah objected to being likened to a baby or indeed a toy and in so doing I think she hit upon Mahad's point precisely. I was treating the group like a toy, a plaything that I would use and then walk away from; they were as helpless as babies. A baby needs someone on whom it can depend, not someone watching from a distance. When the group were trying to do the task, they needed a teacher, not a researcher and would-be 'doctor'.

Mahad's second analogy is even more disturbing. Here he likened the group experience to being in a simulated car crash, where dummies are used to test what changes need to be made to the car. The implication was that I was using them as 'test dummies' to further my own understanding of group work and in so doing I deliberately wanted the group to crash. I was not there to rescue them, only to observe from afar. As Mahad had said at the beginning, they would have got on better without me. The group had started out with a will to succeed in the task, but soon this dissolved into a mess of anger, denial and escape. The children sensed I was not proving myself to be the leader who would look after and help them. Mahad tried to express this truth about the group, but the others, including myself, did not want to hear any more of it.

At the time I was convinced that the problems in the group lay with the immature behaviour of the girls. I was unable to hear what Mahad was trying to say; like Aaliyah, I did not want to face the real issues. There seems such irony in Aaliyah's statement that we were together not to discuss feelings but to be learning about 'History'. As Bion states, few of us are prepared to put ourselves in that dangerous, vulnerable and precarious position of learning from experience, from our own history. We do not want our neat, coherent story to be threatened with an altogether less certain and more challenging one.

The gendered nature of expressing feelings

In their exploration about whether it was appropriate to express feelings, Shanise introduced the idea that this was a gendered issue. She talked about the way some girls in the class fulfilled the idea of being quiet and compliant, hiding their feelings,

compared to a boy who seemed to have the freedom to give full vent to showing his emotions:

- Shanise: What it means is that I can get in trouble and Mahad could just be like 'yeah, he's in trouble'
- Mahad: He?
- Jarek: She
- Aaliyah: She's in trouble
- Shanise: But like, you know like quiet people, like Christina and Maya, they just sit down and they are quiet
- Jarek: /We're quiet now
- Aaliyah: It's not funny
- Shanise: They're quiet but you don't know their feelings, what they're feeling, like when, for example Jamie, he's like always when he's in trouble he's always throwing round the tables and like doing everything what could disturb people
- Aaliyah: /He expresses his feelings

Notice in this extract how Shanise referred to herself using a masculine pronoun – 'he's in trouble'. The others picked up on this and tried to correct her. There was another occasion in the discussion when she referred to her and Aaliyah being like brothers. Again the rest of the group assumed she had made a mistake – you mean sisters, surely? I wonder if these two examples were an expression of her desire to be able to inhabit the embodied practices and behaviours of a boy. She did not want to have to hide her feelings like the quiet girls in class, but to have the freedom to express herself without then getting into trouble.

There has been a wealth of research on girls and femininities that explores the issue of the performance of the normative/idealised position of 'girl' in the context of school and the pressure that girls feel to represent themselves as nice, good, caring, passive and nurturing (e.g. Ringrose, 2008; Walkerdine, 1990; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001). A girl who is loud, outspoken and confident risks being rejected as being unfeminine, moreover, the limits of the school culture to accommodate

aggressive female behaviour means the girl might also be labelled a 'bully' (Ringrose, 2008). In her study about what it is 'to be a girl', Ali (2003) found that notions of 'femininity' are also classed and raced. She quotes research that shows how 'Black girls' can inadvertently be pushed together into one group and be perceived as loud, confident and overtly sexual (Shanise and Aaliyah were both Black Caribbean girls). Ali warns, however, of the dangers of treating race as fixed.

The conversation in the group became increasingly futile and what Bion terms 'devoid of intellectual content' (1961, p. 39). The children started to tell funny stories about classmates and mutual friends, as well as trade jokes with each other. Perhaps Jarek sensed my discomfort, for he suggested that those who wanted to continue giggling leave the group '*and let the team carry on; you can count to ten and take a deep breath and then when you are ready, you can come back in*'. Aaliyah and Shanise walked to the door. I told them to sit back down. I could walk away, but I was not going to let them do likewise.

Concluding thoughts

Although my analysis focuses on the particular context of my dual role of teacher and researcher, I do feel that it fits in with other research that examines the psychic implications of teachers' words and actions. Bibby (2010) explores the fantasy where the teacher imagines his/her words are neutral and benign; words are assumed to only carry one meaning and their receipt to have no implication or emotional significance beyond that meaning. She relates a painful exchange from the classroom between the teacher and a boy, Muhi, who could not answer a maths question. The teacher used a series of humiliating and sarcastic questions which only served to highlight his ignorance:

We cannot know how Muhi understood himself at this moment or subsequently as a response to this moment. Indeed, he may have repressed the episode. But repression is not erasure; it becomes part of the unconscious and continues to circulate in phantasies, fantasies and desires. He was certainly being shown an image of himself as stupid and contemptible; an impoverished version of himself that was made visible to him *and* the rest of the class. (p. 40)

When we read accounts like this of teacher behaviour, we often do so in horror. This teacher becomes the 'bad teacher', split off from the goodness of teaching that I assume to be part of my own practice. Even now I want to think that I did not publicly humiliate the children by my actions in the way Muhi's teacher did – I want to believe that I was not a 'bad' researcher. I understand that teachers, including myself, find it painful and difficult to consider the ways in which we might damage or harm children with words or actions that were never intended to be received as such. It would certainly make teaching an even more impossible profession to always hold this thought in mind as we teach. As difficult as it is, I think there are particular experiences of teaching or researching when we can choose to learn something about the emotional dynamic of our relationship with our pupils or research participants. To use Mahad's analogy of a car crash, we can choose to deal with the potential harm caused by the crash, rather than treat it as a 'hit and run'.

Chapter Six

Keeping feelings out of the group

In the previous chapter I described the attempts of Aaliyah to keep feelings out of the group; in this chapter I continue to explore this fantasy that suggests we can keep affect separate from encounters with knowledge. Much of my analysis focuses on one girl, Daniella. I feel that a very brief outline of her home situation is necessary, for without this detail, it would be very difficult to tell the story of this group. Daniella had recently arrived at the school and had already established a reputation amongst staff and pupils for her aggressive temper and violent outbursts. A complicated and troubled home life had resulted in much upheaval in her living and schooling arrangements; at the point of this observation she was living with a relative. Daniella tested every school relationship to its limits and her peers had become wary (and scared) of her. The lesson I came to observe was a maths lesson. The teacher explained how she had to think carefully about which group Daniella could join for the collaborative task, for she was keen that the group should provide a 'calm' experience for her. Naima, Esther and Salma were all quiet, well behaved and conscientious individuals and to the teacher they represented good role models for Daniella. These four girls did not normally work as a group or typically spend time together in the playground and as I sat to observe them, the unspoken anxiety in the group was palpable. In my description of their experience of working together I will focus on the ways in which the girls tried to reduce the demands of collaboration. I will interpret their actions as forms of defence to limit the anxiety and anger about being made to work together. I want to suggest, however, that their inability to address the emotional difficulties of working together impacted upon the ways in which they were able to take risks mathematically.

How the group dealt with the explicit task

The maths task involved collaborating together to find out the number of squares within an $n \times n$ outline and the rule for how the pattern of numbers develops. The first three terms of the problem are as follows:

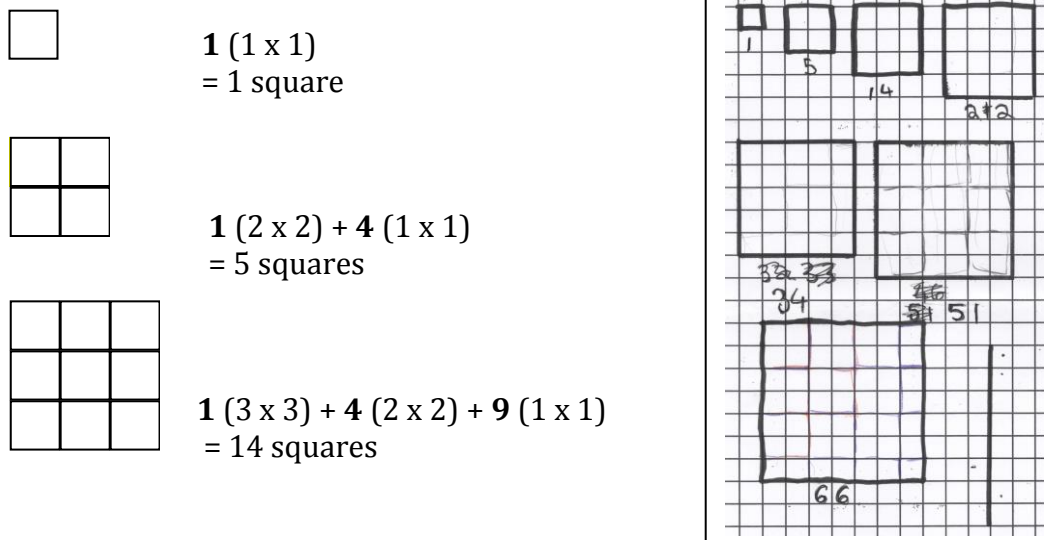


Fig 1: the first three terms of the problem and Salma's worksheet

As soon as the girls were sent to their table to start the investigation, each of them picked up a piece of squared paper and became absorbed in their own task of drawing squares and working out totals, the only sound that of whispered counting. There had been not one word shared between them about how to tackle the task and after completing the first couple of simple squares, it was apparent that Daniella and Naima were confused about how to continue. Daniella suggested they work out the next square outline together:

- Daniella: This one, I think we should all wait for each other
- Naima: Yeah we are all on the same question
- Daniella: We should work it out together (*Salma starts counting without the others*) Salma! We should all work it out together.

Daniella's suggestion to work it out together is interesting, for it was far from realised in the group. I am not sure if she actually did want them to start collaborating. My impression was that she wanted them to all agree on writing the same answer on each of their papers. Esther provided this 'help' to Daniella and Naima, through publicly sharing her answers, rather than explaining the process of getting there. They seemed satisfied with this. As she did so, she barely raised her voice above a whisper. Salma had her head down – her headscarf pulled across her

face – and was going through the investigation at her own pace. The helplessness of Daniella and Naima began to show through in their desire for any answer – whether it was correct seemed not to matter, as seen in this next extract:

- Daniella: This one's 34. Let's just stick with 34 for now, yeah?
Naima: Wait a minute...yeah.
Daniella: Let's just stick with 34 for now, yeah
Naima: And see if it is anything later
Daniella: And let's go to this one. We're going to run out of time, so let's go to this one and when we've finished this one, go back to this one.

Esther was increasingly relied upon by Daniella and Naima to come up with answers, but she too lacked an effective strategy, failing to consider how the pattern of numbers was growing. There was very little to distinguish this as the collaborative activity that the teacher had hoped for, beyond the copying of each other's solutions and talk about which square they were on and what answer to write down. Towards the end of the task, even Salma had taken to copying down Esther's responses. Each time Esther came to an answer, the others checked with each other to confirm what she had decided. The trouble was Esther kept changing her mind as she discovered additional squares that she had missed. Naima and Daniella became frustrated each time they had to scribble out an answer for the revised total.

I was aware of the feelings of unease amongst the girls in being made by their teacher to form a group and perhaps it was my presence that kept the experience as polite and civil as it was. They were just desperate to get through the task, as quickly as possible, without having to engage with each other. The girls just needed answers– any answers. At the start of the observation I was sat close up to the table, but at some point I must have pushed my chair back, for by the end I was watching from a distance of a few feet away. I think in some ways I did not want to connect to this group any longer, to be a part of their struggle. (Journal entry)

The way Daniella and Naima relied on Esther to come up with the answers suggests that there were elements of Bion's basic assumption group of *dependency*. It seemed that they were prevented from thinking by their fear of failure; they looked to Esther to be their 'saviour' and provide them with hope and security for that point in time when they would face judgment. They needed to know that when they faced their teacher's red pen and their performance was judged, they would not be found on the wrong side, damned by a series of crosses on their page. As the task progressed, however, and their sheets became increasingly messy with crossings out, I think doubt began to creep into the minds of Naima and Daniella as to whether Esther really could be the saviour to bring them through this time together. She had, after all, not provided them with the clean, neat sheet of answers that perhaps they had hoped for.

'Sum, I am'

What particularly fascinated me about this group was the fragmented approach that these girls took towards the task. They were unable to see the 'whole', to appreciate how the first step of 'one' was related to the subsequent terms in the sequence that produced multiples of this first unit. Instead each square was treated as separate to the one they had just completed. They did not look for patterns or make predictions or try to join up a set of discrete tasks of counting squares. Through this redefinition of the task, they were able to experience a modicum of success (by their terms), for the demands on thinking were reduced.

Gray and Tall (1994) found that success in maths is about how pupils cope with the progression from counting procedures to processes of arithmetic and to the concept of number. More able mathematicians have a deep 'sense' of number and can therefore use their knowledge in a powerful way. The less able rely on counting procedures and whilst this may provide a sense of security, they fail to generalise beyond the procedure when more sophisticated responses are required. Such children may be good at doing 'sums' in the short term, but long-term they lack the flexibility and creativity that will give them ultimate success. Gray and Tall describe how an important step towards being able to think about and manipulate numbers

is to realise that number can take on its own stable existence as a mental object. For example, the child comes to realise that the number of items in a group is independent of the way the items are arranged or the order in which they are counted.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, there is the suggestion that understanding number to have its own stable existence as a mental object links to an individual's emotional development and sense of one's own separate and stable existence. Donald Winnicott (1986), a psychoanalyst and paediatrician, linked children's emotional development to learning mathematics. In an address to mathematics teachers in 1968, he stated that a central feature in development of identity is the arrival and secure maintenance of the stage of 'I am' (which in Latin is the same as the mathematical word 'sum'); this he called 'unit status'. In healthy development, he suggests, the baby gradually begins to experience self as separate from the mother; the baby develops a sense of being both a subject and an object simultaneously, for the two are no longer merged. Awareness develops of what is 'me' and 'not me'. Winnicott recognised three stages along this continuum of development of the sense of 'I am': (1) unit status has been achieved; there is the capacity for meaningful life and work, with an individual sense of 'wholeness'; (2) unit status has yet to be securely achieved; (3) the process of achieving unit status has been disrupted and growth is impaired.

Winnicott argued that achievement of unit status prepares the child to think mathematically and he reflected the three stages of development to the steps required in teaching 'sums':

When you teach sums, you have to teach children as they come, and certainly you will recognise the three types:

1. Those who start easily with *one*.
2. Those who have not achieved unit status and for whom *one* means nothing.
3. Those who manipulate concepts and who are held back by banal considerations of pounds, shillings and pence. (Winnicott, 1986, p. 61, original emphasis)

Whilst a child working at the first stage can enjoy manipulating numbers and applying maths operations, a child working at the second stage cannot: *'What I think you must not expect is that a child who has not reached unit status can enjoy bits and pieces. These are frightening to such a child and represent chaos'* (Winnicott, 1986, p.61). At the third stage the child is able to follow mathematical procedures, but is incapable of making emotional connections with this skill and therefore cannot draw 'real life' significance from it (like using 'pounds, shilling and pence').

My understanding from teaching these four girls maths on other occasions was that their ability to work out maths problems was hampered by their stage of using counting procedures (with the exception of Esther). It is not appropriate to make suppositions about whether these difficulties were reflected in their emotional development as young infants. What can be taken from Winnicott's theory is the idea that these girls required emotional support, not just mathematical support. Perhaps what this group needed before they could begin to think meaningfully about the maths, was the support from an adult to help contain their anxieties.

In the discussion afterwards Daniella made a great deal of telling the group that the right answer to the task did not matter, but that they had to 'stick together' and that it was best to keep feelings hidden. These appear to me to be defences to protect against fears of disintegration of the group. I will explore these ideas in the next section, when I describe the conversation between the girls about the experience of working together.

'Just take the answer off them'

At the beginning of the discussion Salma described the difficulties of dealing with conflicting answers, but she explained that through a process of checking, it was possible to sort through the confusion and arrive at the answer. Daniella, however, stated that 'you never know if you got the right answer'. She continued to dismantle Salma's desire for right answers, pronouncing that any answer will do, for the more important issue was that the group sticks together:

- Daniella If you're in a group and one person's got the number then you should just take the answer off them. When it comes to the end if we've got it right or if we've got it wrong, at least we've tried [...]In a group, I don't think we should be like selfish and always want the right number. I think in a group, if one person gets the number, then we'll take that number and if that person gets it wrong then we all get it wrong. Instead of saying to the person 'ah, you made us get that wrong'
- Naima: Yeah and get angry
- Salma: Yeah
- Daniella That's what I mean like. If we work in a group, we stick with each other as a group.

I think these words of Daniella add substance to the idea that she could not derive meaning from the maths task itself. It seemed too overwhelming and therefore she needed a dependent structure to the group. She argued that always demanding the right answer was being selfish. How do we interpret this? I think she did not want the rest of the group to start focussing too heavily on the actual maths, for this would require her to sacrifice her safety and security and it would raise her anxiety about facing mathematical discussions for which she felt ill-equipped. In chapter two I described the tension that exists in groups between wanting one's own needs met and yet wanting also to enter into a sense of being part of the group and identifying with it. Dependence on Esther as a leader suited Daniella, since Esther provided a steady stream of answers without trying to engage the others in explaining the process by which she came to these solutions. With this form of help, Daniella could feel part of the group and the 'task'. Maybe Salma's concern about checking answers was perceived as selfish because this would mean Daniella's needs would be overlooked.

Daniella went on to try and persuade the group that the gain from having the right answers was nothing substantial:

- Daniella: And I think, yeah, if we are in a group, yeah, it don't matter if we win or lose because

Naima: /At least you tried
Daniella: It's not the whole, like
Naima: /It's not the end of the world
Daniella: Exactly. It's not the end of the world. It's not like you're winning your life, is it?
Naima: No
Daniella: Because I could understand if you were like winning your life but [...] you're not even winning nothing. You're just getting the answers right and just getting a well done from Miss Rowley.

I wonder if there were echoes of disappointment in the words of Daniella. Perhaps she had expected more from her teacher, Mrs Rowley – more than a set of ticks on the page and a well-done. She wanted to 'win life'. Perhaps she wanted to gain a sense of unity, of wholeness of self. If we assume that she was feeling emotionally undone and at a loss with the intellectual demands of the classroom, then no amount of right answers would fill the void within. Maybe what Daniella needed in the first instance was not maths support, but some other activity that would help her to develop emotional connections, to understand her own sense of agency and how she might exercise this in relation to the demands of the world around her.

'Stick together'

Daniella had spoken the words that *'if we work in a group, we stick with each other as a group'*. She reiterated this sentiment in scribbled jottings that she made during the conversation:



Fig 2: 'Stick to-gether'
(Graphically separated)

The discussion about sticking together was picked up by others, who related the idea to working with people you did not like. Naima commented that when the teacher puts her in a group with someone she does not like, then she would 'stick with them', but not necessarily talk to that person. This seems an odd formulation,

since it is unusual in life to want to stand by people that we do not get on with. I wonder if the words of Naima reflected her anxiety about having Daniella in the group. After all, Daniella was a volatile character, whose displays of anger were frightening to witness. I'm sure that Naima understood that the teacher expected her and the other two girls to support Daniella, furthermore I was there to witness this event. Maybe Naima had decided that she would tolerate having Daniella in the group, but not necessarily engage with her. Later in the discussion Naima used the metaphor of a chain to relate to this idea of sticking together:

It's just like you have a feeling like, I'm not saying this is for real, but it's just like there's an invisible chain and us two are like chained together and it's like you can't stop us from being apart from each other. So if you get in trouble, you try and help the other person. If you get in trouble, they'll try and help you. It's like there's a chain that's connecting you two.

An inconsistency in Naima's use of language is the way she describes being chained together and yet 'you can't stop us from being apart from each other'. Perhaps she was insisting upon her independence, for no matter who she was 'chained' to in a group and expected to work with, she was her own person. I wonder, also, whether she understood that helping out someone in trouble was a way that omnipotence could be expressed, since a chain represents strength. If someone needs my help they might feel attached to me. At times this might give me a sense of power, but it might also feel like a burden, and then the chain might feel more like a fetter. It is interesting that Naima describes how you can *feel* like being chained to a person, but this is not for *real*, hinting at the way experience and truth become detached from each other and the times when we doubt the reality of what we feel.

In the context of their comments about working with someone you do not like, Salma contributed the following:

Salma: If you're in a group with somebody that hates you then

Daniella: /Not hate. They don't like you. Hate is too strong a word.

Salma: They don't really like you that much and then you're trying to work out the

answer and they say 'oh, I don't want you in my group anymore'. It just makes you feel a bit left out and [...] afterwards you go on the carpet and the teacher says all the right answers, you mark it and the answers you say, and afterwards they look at you and they look at your work and they just because they're in your group, they sit next to you and they look at your work and then they haven't done their work, so they rub it all off and put in the right answer and it just makes you feel, like, why are you copying me?

Why did Salma relate this anecdote? Did she not want Daniella in the group and did that explain why she was not her usual bubbly self, but withdrawn and quiet? Or was she revealing the hate that in those moments she was feeling towards the others for not treating the maths task as she thought they should? Salma's anecdote appears to speak of the frustration that she felt. She wanted the right answers, but debating whether or not an answer was correct threatened the group culture and mentality of dependence and avoidance of thinking about the maths. She was in a group, but she did not feel part of it. Was she also relating her frustration with Daniella and Naima? When the teacher went through the answers on the carpet, they could potentially tick some of their responses, even though these answers were copied from another. Maybe she was crying out – what about me? Where is the praise for me? I tried my best and did not copy, but how will the teacher know?

'Just keep it inside'

Later on, attention turned to discussing how the children dealt with showing their feelings. The stimulus for this came from me; I referred back to the beginning of the discussion when they talked about children making them feel left out of groups or moaning because they got the answers wrong – I asked 'what do you do with those feelings?'

Daniella: I just keep it inside, I don't, I don't really

Naima: /I just continue with the work

Daniella: Like I don't really...I feel hurt, but I don't show them

Esther: Yeah I feel hurt inside, really upset and normally when I'm upset

- Daniella: /I don't show it, I just show that I'm OK, that I'm getting on with it and that I don't really care
- Esther: /And sometimes, I keep it in mostly and if they moan at me I don't show it but I'm hurt inside and [...] I don't really talk as much as I would, even if I am quiet.
- Naima: Like if they're moaning at you for getting it wrong and then you're feeling like you're sad inside but you don't show it to them because they're going to start
- Daniella: /they're just going to laugh at you
- Naima: They're going to start make you feel worse so you keep it inside and try and make them feel that you're like
- Daniella: /OK
- Naima: That you're like OK
- Daniella: My sister's always said, yeah, if like the person is just trying to make you upset just go along with and say, 'yeah, I know' because like, if someone calls you fat for example, well don't say 'no I'm not, no I'm not', just say [...] 'I know and after school I'm going to get a McDonalds, a Big Mac, that's how fat I am'. Just go along with it because if, like I know it's hard because I'm saying it and I'm one of the people who sometimes can't go along with it and I do argue back but the best thing is to try and say 'yeah, I know'. Because then the people get bored and just go away.

These girls appeared to be suggesting that it is better to keep feelings hidden because to show how you really feel will exacerbate an already painful situation. When feeling upset, sad or hurt Esther said she tended to stay quiet, Naima told how she would try and show others that she was 'OK' and Daniella went so far as to say that she would outwardly agree with the aggressors, seemingly to present an image of self that was impervious to insult and exclusion. The fact that her sister had advocated this strategy maybe indicated to her that she was not isolated. It could be that it was this fear of isolation that informed Daniella's decision to avoid direct confrontation.

Being able to express emotion as a girl in school is not easy. In her study of girls' friendship groups, George (2007) presents the dilemma that girls face in trying to

respond to constructions of friendship idealised by the culture of the school (as 'good', 'polite', 'caring', 'selfless'...) alongside a need for recognition of their own power, status and independence. She discusses how girls are not averse to aggression, but need to express it in a more indirect and subtle way than boys. This was a point that was raised by Shanise in the previous chapter, when she stated that a boy could throw a chair in anger, but girls were expected to be quiet and well-behaved. George highlights one of the main ways in which girls can exercise their power is through excluding members from the friendship circle.

Following on from Daniella's comment about her decision to ignore those who were rude to her, Esther talked about her own experience of being bullied: *'I used to hide behind the gate and not look at them and hide away from them because they used to always be rude to me. I was five or six when that happened'*. Esther's response of hiding fits with Walkerdine's (1990) suggestion that girls struggle to express anger and aggression against internalised versions of femininity that involve girls being 'good' and 'passive'. Daniella offered some advice to Esther:

Daniella: Well, do you know what I think everybody, d'you know I think the bullies are, get bullied by like their big older brothers or sisters and then when they come to school

Naima: /they want to take it out on someone else

Daniella: and then when they come to school

Esther: /they want to take out their anger

Daniella: They want to take it out on someone else ... like sometimes yeah, when they're upset they just like, they don't want to be round no-one and then everyone thinks that that person's horrible, but they're not. They don't want to be around no-one at that moment, just in case like they get angry. Because I know when I'm angry and someone keeps talking to me and keeps talking to me I get really angry and then I just scream. Because before I can remember when I was younger someone really, really wound me up and I took it out on the wrong person. The teacher come up to me and wanted to talk to me and I screamed 'leave me alone!'. I was screaming, kicking and everything. Because someone can like do that to

you. Some people just know how to wind you up, know how to push your buttons basically.

Daniella offered an insightful comment about aggression, drawing upon her own experience. Struggling to deal with the pain and fear of oppressive relationships, it seems that one way to respond is to project this badness from self onto others. But as Daniella remarked, sometimes the 'wrong person' can be on the receiving end of this 'badness'. Daniella was unusual in that she did express her anger at school through practices like kicking, screaming and shouting, but through this process she was labelled a 'bully' by many teachers and pupils. What George argues in her book, is that aggressive behaviour from girls might be roundly condemned, but there are other forms of bullying, more subtle and less easy to detect by teachers, that girls often deploy. Daniella's words indicate that aggression in girls does not have to be viewed as deviance from normative versions of femininity; instead we might consider the struggle for some girls to cope with feelings of anger and anxiety, when there is a failure of containment from significant relationships. As she reminds us, this does not make the girl a 'horrible person'.

Salma had not participated in this discussion about feelings. The others seemed intent on maintaining the appearance that everything in the group was fine, but she looked uncomfortable. I indicated to the group that it was time for lunch and that we must get back to class. In this last moment Salma offered the following words:

I wanted to work in a group, but I wasn't sure how the group was going to start out, that's all, say like we were going to fall out with each other, I wasn't sure. I wasn't like, I was like I don't want to put out one hundred percent happiness into this and stuff like that. I was feeling peculiar because we don't like usually hang out with each other.

It seemed to me that Salma was voicing that which the others had studiously avoided. Throughout the task she had pulled her headscarf over her face (to obscure herself from the view of others? to hide the others from her view?). Metaphorically it was as if she was removing the veil in that moment, revealing something of her

feelings – her fears about the group, her ambivalent feelings and her uncertainty. Whilst Salma made this comment, Daniella rustled paper and squeaked her pen across a surface, so much so that Salma could hardly be heard. My journal entry charts what happened after the group discussion:

As we walked out of the room, Salma commented on the fact that she had goose bumps from the squeaking sound that Daniella was making with a pen. She said it set her teeth on edge. Maybe it wasn't the pen that annoyed her most. Maybe Salma, more than any other person within that room, was prepared to face up to the anxiety of being together. (Journal entry)

Daniella did not want to hear about Salma's difficulties with the group. She wanted to construct a narrative of group work that highlighted the importance of everyone sticking together and not moaning at each other. She wanted to invest in a fantasy of 'happy families'. In holding onto her fantasy of the group, she had to work hard at keeping at a distance Salma's anxieties about falling out.

Concluding thoughts

I started this chapter with saying that I wanted to explore the fantasy that suggests affect can be kept separate from the business of learning in the classroom. The teacher of these girls reported that she was satisfied with how the group had got; they might not have achieved all of the task, but they had not fallen out and Daniella had not 'kicked off'. For her that was a good result. Emotions seemingly had no place in 'successful' group work for these girls. It seems that the girls meanwhile understood this, for their compliant behaviour kept alive the hope that they would be judged favourably by me and their teacher. As they said, it was better to 'keep it inside'. I can't help but feel, though, that there was some essential part of these girls and this group that was lacking. Pitt and Rose (2007) describe the refusal to acknowledge the emotional life in the classroom with these words:

[M]uch of the work that teachers do, whether they acknowledge it or not, already concerns the emotional life of individual children and the emotional dynamics of the classroom. This work is difficult to talk about at the best of times, but is particularly so

when emotional life is seen as either irrelevant to learning or an obstacle to it. (2007, p. 328-29).

Rather than consider emotions to be an obstacle to learning, we might think about how the ability to move beyond the routines of a task relates to a sense of emotional security in the group. There might be too much anxiety within the group to feel the freedom to speak out a thought, challenge someone's idea or take risks with an idea. In the next chapter I consider what happens when emotions are spoken about in the group.

Chapter Seven

The desire to be the chosen one

In chapter two I described the tension that exists between satisfying the demands of the group and having one's own individual needs and desires met. According to Freud (1930) groups potentially provide safety and security for the individual who would otherwise be vulnerable in the face of suffering from the world around and weakness of self. Being in a group affords a sense of dependency upon others. However group life necessitates laws and regulations to ensure that aspects like 'fairness' and 'harmony' are established; if people insisted upon fulfilling their own desires, the stability and survival of the group would be jeopardised. So whilst we need groups in order to survive, they are yet the source of much unhappiness, through the ways in which they curb the gratification of our own instincts for pleasure. In this chapter I want to think about a group of four children where there was much unhappiness. I want to suggest that this might have been because some of them feared they would be overlooked in the group and not receive the individual recognition that they desired.

In this group there were three boys – Mahad, Simeon and Bailey, along with one girl, Amanda. The teacher had placed them together, for in this lesson she had decided that the class were to work in 'mixed ability' groups. Mahad and Amanda were considered the 'more able' children who could support the other two. This was the second time that I had observed Mahad – he was in the group that tried to engage with the History task (chapter five). This detail is significant, for my interpretation back then was that I had not proved myself to be the leader of the group that he desired. The combative and controlling role that Mahad now assumed in this English task may have been related to this previous experience.

The task that these children were set by their teacher centred on a novel that the class had been reading in their English lessons. The novel was about a boy who lived in a totalitarian state where there was a one-child policy enforced for families; as the second-born he was sent into a life of hiding. In this particular English lesson, the

teacher presented the class with data about the growth of the global population and also information about food distribution around the world. She then put them into groups and set them the task of debating the one-child policy. The teacher explained that she wanted groups to consider both sides of the argument; she wanted them to listen to each other's viewpoints, to discuss and negotiate, so that a consensus of opinion could be reached. She provided each group with a sheet of paper upon which the main points of argument could be summarised and she stated that the groups must each elect one spokesperson to feed back these points to the rest of class.

In the previous chapter I described how teachers often split off and treat as separate the cognitive demands of the task from the emotional aspect of children's development. I do not think the teacher considered that this task, which potentially raised issues about the viability and vulnerability of life, and supremacy of the eldest sibling, was anything more than an intellectual debate. I want to suggest, however, that these themes – fantasised about by the children – mobilised anxiety within the group. I will look at how this anxiety might have increased the tension for the children between a sense that they needed each other for support and yet the desire to be the one who 'survived', the chosen one.

How the group dealt with the explicit task

As soon as the children sat down together, Mahad took control of the group. He pronounced with eloquence the problem of the number of starving people in the world. Bailey supported his view and he too spoke with passion and conviction about the importance of quality of life. Amanda and Simeon tried to speak, but they were not given an opportunity to enter the discussion. Frustrated about not being let into the conversation, Amanda suggested that they took turns to talk, however Bailey and Mahad showed no acknowledgement of her idea. Not only was Amanda frustrated with the lack of turn-taking in the discussion, but she was keenly aware that what was being discussed was not always in line with the task that the teacher had set out. Bailey and Mahad started to discuss droughts and how food could be preserved, so she tried to remind them that they were moving away from the topic.

Mahad became increasingly angry with her; at one point he shouted at her 'Can't I speak?'. With persistence she tried to steer the conversation back to the 'one-child policy', but whenever she wanted to get her view across, Mahad and Bailey ignored or talked over her. Amanda did not argue back, but quietly picked up a pen and began to summarise the main discussion points on paper.

Amanda seemed typical of a 'nice girl' (Reay, 2001). 'Nice' girls are seen by other children as hard-working and well-behaved, but with this image comes the connotation of 'being boring'. Amongst the inner-city primary school children of her study, Reay found the position(ing) of 'being nice' to be specific to the formulation of white, middle-class femininity and to signify an absence of the toughness of attitude that the working-class girls generally aspired to; meanwhile the boys positioned the 'nice girls' as the '*polluting, contagious 'other'*'. *They would regularly hold up crossed fingers whenever one of these girls came near them'* (p. 159). The 'nice girls' did not challenge the boys but rather developed avoidance strategies which further constrained their own freedom. What Reay shows is that there is a co-dependence between femininities and masculinities; neither can be fully understood in isolation from the other. If girls struggle to make meaning of themselves as female it is often because of the highly gendered peer group discourses in the classroom, which inscribe views that it is better being a boy. Mahad and Bailey maintained the hierarchy of masculine superiority by devaluing Amanda's opinions and contributions; whilst Amanda made some attempt to assert herself, she seemed to acquiesce to their dominance. Perhaps the act of taking control of the pen was her way of taking hold of some power within the group.

Simeon seemed less bothered about having a say than the others, however he did attempt to break the tension on a couple of occasions with a joke about something that had been said. Again Amanda appealed to the group to start thinking about what they would present back to the class. Simeon said to her 'you should be a business woman'. She looked pleased by this comment and said 'thank you', probably pleased by the fact that he took her seriously. By now the body language of these children reflected their positions – Bailey and Mahad turned their bodies to

face each other and Amanda sat up close to Simeon, sometimes putting a hand on his arm. Was this to reassure him and affirm a relationship of dependency? Or was this to restrain him? Maybe his joke-telling indicated to her that he might not put the needs of the group first; perhaps he could not be trusted to take the group seriously.

Whether Bailey intentionally wanted to provoke Amanda is unclear, but he became increasingly provocative in the statements that he was making. At one point he declared that one reason for having population control was to have fewer girls born into the world – *'I'm not being funny, but girls make more children. They get pregnant and have more babies. Boys can't get pregnant, so one way to stop there being too many people is to have less girls'*. Mahad told him that this would result in the human race being wiped out. Everyone started shouting at once, to the extent that I intervened and asked them to speak one at a time and quietly. Bailey changed the subject and spoke about how the issue was about having a life that was worth living, as opposed to simply surviving. Simeon added *'it's better to die a peaceful death than a horrible death'*. Mahad agreed with him and illustrated on his wrist, how you could cut your veins to end your life if you had had enough of living. The conversation had taken a very sinister turn and I became so uncomfortable with this focus on death and suicide that I told the group it was time to feedback to the rest of the class, so they needed to elect a spokesperson. Perhaps unconsciously I was aware of the need to bring this group to a peaceful end, before it ended in a horrible death, to use Simeon's words.

Each group member wanted to be the one to feedback to the rest of the class. Mahad therefore suggested that they play 'rock, paper, scissors' to decide, which he proceeded to win. The weighty issues that they had been discussing were reduced to this game of chance - a metaphor for thinking about life as a lottery, perhaps. Amanda declared that it was not fair – *'I knew you were going to win, even before we played'*. Life may be a lottery, but some people have a better chance than others it seems. The fact that the teacher had stated only one child could report backs seemed to echo with the theme of the book; in the story only the eldest boy had a

legitimate position, the other brother had to remain hidden and away from public view. The child to stand at the front of class was potentially the one to receive the praise from the teacher, the one to take credit for the work, the one who would be noticed by others. The other children in the group may have felt like they were being 'hidden' from view. What was very evident was Bailey's determination that it should not be Amanda that got to take on this position. Looking angrily at her, he complained *'You're the brainiest in the class. You always get to do everything'*.

The class was waiting for us and still the group had not resolved its decision about who should be spokesperson. I suggested Amanda took on this role. In some way I wonder if I felt Bailey's criticism personally. As a school pupil I too was told by my peers that I was the brainiest in the class; it had not felt like a compliment, but an envious attack that threatened my acceptance into the peer group. I tried to keep my academic ability hidden, pretending to my peers that I had not done my homework or playing down the good grades that I received. In some ways I wonder if the act of choosing Amanda was an unconscious reaction – 'don't hide away, be you and stand strong'. Here I was firmly taking hold of my role as teacher, but with my interference, Amanda became the 'chosen one', potentially increasing the experience of envy amongst the boys and the likelihood of attack. In the discussion that followed, it will be seen how this did indeed appear to be the case.

Breakdown in the group

When we sat down for the discussion, I introduced the session by telling them that this was their time to talk about how it had felt to work together as a group. Mahad and Bailey, however, immediately continued with their earlier debate. Amanda tried to appeal to them to return to what we were supposed to be discussing:

Mahad: I really, really feel strongly that

Bailey: /Same with me cos I'm the second child. My sister was the first child to be born, my bigger sister. Like say if I was a baby, I went to a shop in China and after, some Chinese man say I don't have the right to live (laughs), yeah, I'd feel offended yeah that I don't have the right to live

because I actually do have the right to live. I was born

Amanda: /let's talk about how it felt to work in the group now

Bailey: /I was born to have a life, I wasn't born to be in, I wasn't born to be

Mahad: /born to be chained up

Bailey: I wasn't born to be killed. I was born to be a human, I was born to walk, I was born to walk across this earth, I was born to see

Simeon: /because if babies are born to die, what's the point in having a baby? Because you see the mother one day and having the baby, then you

Amanda: /Let's talk about what it felt like in the group.

What we need to understand is that all these children had one other sibling. For Mahad and Simeon, this was a younger sister; for Amanda, it was a younger brother. Bailey was the only one to be the younger of two siblings. In relating the consequences of a one-child law to their own situations, Bailey realised as the younger sibling, he would not have the right to live. He was making a direct correspondence with the story. He spoke the above words with such passion – '*I wasn't born to be killed. I was born to be a human...*'. Perhaps in those moments he was overcome with a sense of fear and anxiety for the way life was not always within control of the individual. Maybe Amanda's discomfort with the topic of discussion linked in some way to a sense of guilt – unlike Bailey, she was the elder sibling and therefore her life was safe, underlined perhaps by the fact that I had earlier chosen her.

As the discussion progressed, the children became visibly upset and frustrated with each other. In particular, Mahad and Bailey were increasingly annoyed with Amanda for interrupting their continuing debate about population control with her insistence that they leave that subject behind. I have chosen to present a lengthy extract from the transcript to illustrate how this tension built up:

RE: /Amanda, can I ask you, how does it feel at the moment when you're trying to say something to these, to Mahad, and he's not responding?

Amanda: A bit annoying because I'm trying to say something, because basically we're not even meant to be talking about this right now, we're meant to be talking

how it feels about working in a group and you're kind of changing the subject and bringing it to what we were discussing earlier and I'm trying to explain to you that we're meant to be doing something different.

Mahad: Ok

Bailey: Yeah, but I really feel for this situation

Amanda: /Yeah, I'm not saying that you can't feel for it, I'm not saying that you can't feel for the subject

Bailey: [I'll say what I want to say

Simeon: [Stop arguing now

Amanda: Can we discuss what we're meant to do now?

Bailey: Yeah, but I really feel for what I'm saying

Amanda: I understand that you feel strongly, I feel strongly about it as well

Mahad: /One thing about this group, when we voted for me to do the speaking

Amanda: /we didn't vote, we did rock, paper, scissors

Mahad: Yeah, well

Amanda: That isn't really a fair kind of democracy

Mahad: Rock, paper, scissors yeah, is kind of fair though and I don't know why you're objecting

Simeon: /Objection!

Mahad: I don't know why

Simeon: /Objection! We shouldn't be talking about rock, paper, scissors, we should be talking about working in a group.

Mahad: No! I'm talking about the group!

RE: So you're talking about when I asked you to elect a leader and

Mahad: /you could have said at the start when I said let's do rock, paper, scissors

Amanda: /I did

Mahad: You could have said, no I don't want to do this because it's wrong

Amanda: /I did say it wasn't fair

Bailey: Exactly and then now you're saying that

Amanda: /I did say it then

Bailey: Exactly, now you're saying that we're like, we're not talking about something about what we're talking about but now you're butting in to what he's saying

Mahad: Why can't you just let him say what he needs to say first?

Amanda: Because mostly he's talking quite a lot, but when I'm trying to talk about something quite important, you're just blanking me and he's just gone on to

something else/

Bailey: But it's like you're saying that what he's talking about is not important, like it's rubbish

At the beginning of this extract, notice how I continued to support Amanda. I wanted her to put Mahad in his place, almost like a public humiliation of him. I am not proud when I look back and see times like this when I showed partiality towards one child over another. I wonder if I unconsciously desired Amanda to fight back and show some aggression, for this was a part of me that I had denied and repressed in my own childhood when teased by my peers and my siblings.

Amanda wanted to stick to what they should be discussing – how it felt to be in the group, but ironically it seems that feelings were precisely what she did *not* want to deal with. When Bailey and Mahad talked passionately, she was keen to change the subject. Bailey implored her – *'but I really feel for the subject'*; he then challenged her role of regulating the topics for discussion with his statement *'I'll say what I want to say'*. Bailey accused Amanda of treating his ideas like rubbish. Rubbish suggests litter, debris, nonsense or waste that needs to be expelled. Perhaps Bailey was communicating something about how Amanda was making them feel worthless and 'shit', by her repeated call to change the subject of discussion. Or maybe making a connection between his contributions and rubbish hinted at his desire to punish Amanda, for seemingly she was not someone on whom he could depend for emotional support. According to Kleinian theory (1946), the infant wants to attack and punish the bad breast that frustrates and withholds its goodness. To do so, the infant fantasises about controlling the mother, by means of parts of self that it has projected into the 'bad' breast. These parts of self are imagined as excrement evacuated from its own body, which the infant fantasises about hurling into the mother. Bailey could be understood to be punishing Amanda, through hurling his 'rubbish ideas' at her.

Simeon's discomfort in the group was clearly evident, not only by his anxiety over the arguing but also the fact that he looked for opportunities to alleviate the tension with laughter. He kept looking at the clock, counting down the minutes perhaps

before he could escape the room. He was also concerned about what was being recorded. At one point he turned to me and asked *'Is this still recording?'* When I affirmed that it was, he continued *'So it's recording all the bad stuff we say?'* Mahad told him that I was going to burn the tape afterwards; Simeon nodded and said *'She's going to throw it away'*. I had made no comment to the group of either burning the tape or throwing it away – but it seems to me that Bailey's comment about 'rubbish' was being directly picked up by Simeon. Maybe the words of these boys were indication of their desire to punish me. They were suggesting that what was being recorded was not worth keeping – it was bad stuff, rather like rubbish. I suspect they were annoyed, angry and disappointed with me for effectively overriding their decision to do 'rock, paper, scissors' and choosing Amanda. Or perhaps the interpretation is that they thought I also considered their contributions to be worthless and rubbish, as communicated through my overt support of Amanda.

The discussion with these children did not progress well and it broke down into an argument. Mahad and Bailey accused Amanda of not letting them speak, with her repeated calls for them to return to what the session was supposed to be about (although I am not sure what Amanda imagined we should have been talking about). My impression was that Amanda was being maneuvered into the position of the 'enemy' and that Mahad, supported by Bailey, was calling to attack her for the way she was threatening the group with her reminders to focus on the task at hand – elements of a basic assumption group of 'fight'. But as Rioch (1976) points out, basic assumption life is not oriented outward towards reality but inwards towards fantasy, which is then impulsively and uncritically acted out. There is little pausing to consider or test consequences, little patience with an inquiring attitude, and great insistence upon feeling. The accusations against Amanda mounted up – she was interrupting the others, she was not taking it seriously, she treated their contributions like rubbish and she was stopping them from talking about important issues. The fact that reality did not bear witness to these claims mattered not to the others:

Bailey: Like when we're talking yeah and like we go slightly off subject, just for a little, a little tiny bit, yeah, Amanda comes and she says 'ah, stop talking about that, talk about something else what's due to the subject'. But we're saying stuff what's really important to us and she's telling us to move onto another subject.

RE: But can I just tell you what I observed earlier and that is that actually Amanda hardly got to say anything.

Bailey: I know, I'd just tell her to wait her turn and let people say their stuff.

Amanda: /yeah, but then my turn never came.

Bailey: See what I mean, you're butting into what I'm saying

Amanda: But you're saying that I was going to get a turn, but my turn never came.

Bailey: You was going to get a turn.

Amanda: I was, but I didn't

Mahad: Gosh, will you stop butting in.

Simeon: You can talk! But don't use the word 'butting in' because that's not nice.

RE: Bailey, why do you react so strongly to what Amanda says? Amanda's saying something to you and you're getting upset.

Bailey: I'm serious about stuff and it's like she, and it's like, she thinks I'm taking it for a joke and I'm not.

RE: I don't think she's said that at any point.

Bailey: I know she hasn't said it, but I think she is (*long pause*) When she tells me to move on, inside here it hurts

This was a very difficult part of the discussion to observe and be part of. Bailey had become upset and begun crying. Tears were streaming down his face as he spoke these words. In this next part of the analysis, I want to consider why the emotions ran so high during this group time, to the extent that Bailey was reduced to tears. I will argue the book that the children had been reading, with its themes of death, survival and the privileged position of the elder sibling, affected the unconscious life of the group, giving rise to feelings of fear, anxiety and envy.

A fear of annihilation

A theme in the book was the main character's fear that he would be found out by the authorities and thereby be imprisoned or worse still, lose his life. It seems to me

that this disturbing storyline was stirring trauma and a fear of annihilation within the unconscious mentality of the group. According to Hopper (2003, 2012) the ability of a group to maintain a work state can be affected by a fear of annihilation as a result of trauma. The fear of annihilation sounds very dramatic, but it is an axiom of psychoanalysis, rather than necessarily something that is consciously known, understood and able to be articulated. Some experiences are so overwhelming that 'meaning' is not necessarily known consciously. Not that a fear of annihilation relates only to major traumatic events in life – Hopper argues that it is universal and ubiquitous and as such events can be quite mundane. One example could be when the teacher misses a child's name out at register time; another could be when a pupil, used to reading one-to-one with the teacher, is suddenly expected to read alone – that pupil does not know why the teacher no longer wants to sit with him/her. These are simple examples, but we need to understand that when a group of people have been deeply traumatised, a fear of annihilation is especially intense and profound. The nature of the school's population meant there were countless examples of deep trauma in the lives of these children – war, murder, fleeing homes and family, settling in strange countries, transition from place to place. Even if some of these children had not directly experienced the events of their parents, Hopper argues that *'the basic assumption of traumatised societies are likely to be perpetuated across the generations'* (2012, p. xliii). It is my belief that the school's context meant this fear of annihilation was especially profound amongst some groups of pupils.

According to Hopper the fear of annihilation produces basic assumption behaviour of 'incohesion', where extreme anxiety results in groups forming that are incapable of sustaining cooperative work. Group members might 'merge' to form an undifferentiated 'mass' or they might emphasise their individuality by creating an 'aggregate', where there is little connection between group members. Hopper relates this behaviour to groups that operate within organisations associated with trauma (e.g. prisons and mental hospitals); he describes, for example what might happen at committee meetings:

With respect to small groups in the context of traumatized organisations and organisations associated with trauma, the unconscious life of committees tends to be characterised by constant oscillations between aggregation and massification, which is why it is so difficult to accomplish work agendas over a reasonable period of time. The members of such committees have difficulty in co-operating with one another, and in holding a sense of common purpose. Similarly, committees can become massified, as seen in the tendency of their members to agree with one another all the time, and to intrude into one another's work. (2012, p. xlv)

Although I am not equating a school with a traumatised organisation (!), it is possible that the task was stirring uncomfortable experiences of trauma in the lives of these children, particularly since one group member had suffered bereavement of a parent and another child had left relatives behind in a war-torn country and faced the challenges of settling in the UK. Hopper's notion of incohesion is one way of explaining the difficulties that these children faced in maintaining a work group state or holding a common purpose. Rather than form a merged state, they seemed to be defensively preserving their individuality and wanting their own needs addressed; the anger and cold feelings between each other appeared to emphasise this.

The desire or fear of being the chosen one

Hopper (2012) describes how a fear or annihilation might produce envy. A Kleinian reading of envy is that it is a primary impulse from birth. According to Klein (1957) (discussed in Segal, 1992), the small baby attacks the mother's breast out of envy. A bad feeding experience may give rise to a sense that the breast is withholding its goodness, but equally a good experience can be intolerable, for it heightens awareness of the baby's own lack. With the latter, the good breast comes under envious attack from the baby, but within the baby itself there is a good *internal* breast, the source of love and goodness inside, that consequently is also at risk. If the baby successfully attacks the good breast, then it no longer has a centre of goodness inside itself. In thinking about Bailey and his tears, it could be that Amanda's academic abilities were a painful reminder of his own lack. His angry words directed at her might have been designed to attack her 'goodness', but the theory would suggest that in so doing there was no hope for him to gain any peace,

for he was emptying himself also of the goodness within him. In those moments he was surrounded by unhappiness, both inside himself and outside. Maybe this helps us to understand his tears that seemed in excess of the immediate situation and his reference to the fact that 'inside here it hurts'.

Hopper's (2012) use of the term 'envy' has a slightly different meaning from the Kleinian model; he sees it as a protective defence, rather than a primary impulse. If I am worried about my survival, then envy is directed towards spoiling the resources of people who are perceived as potentially helpful but who do not or will not actually help. This meaning might be more useful for considering the group mentality and culture. Maybe the knowledge that only one pupil could feed back to class meant that the group could never really unite to help each other, for ultimately one child would stand alone. For each of them, there was perhaps either a longing or a dread of occupying this position and envious attack became a way of either trying to avoid this position (Simeon and his joke-telling?) or trying to secure it (Mahad trying to silence Amanda?).

There is another way of considering the circulation of envy within the group and that is to consider psychoanalytic writings about siblings. The task, after all, was inviting the children to consider a world without siblings and the supremacy of being the elder sibling. Perhaps the anger and hatred that Bailey and Mahad showed towards Amanda was because as the one who 'knew most', she occupied the equivalent position of the elder sibling and this gave rise to feelings of envy. Coles (2003) argues that there is the desire within us all to be the only child – the fantasy of a world without conflict and where we would inherit all our parents' possessions (especially their psychic possessions, like love and generosity). We want to know that we are the most loved child, but with siblings this changes and envy arises over feelings that one sibling is more favoured than the other. Perhaps Bailey felt that Amanda represented 'the most loved child' to the teacher (and me), because like the privileged, unique child she 'always got to do everything' in class. In his family Bailey might have felt as if his elder sister took precedence over him and here in this

group there might have been elements of a transference relationship in the way he now felt in Amanda's presence.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud comments how being part of a group, where we are dependent upon each other, necessitates demands for equality and fairness. This demand for social justice has its origins in the 'nursery'. The intense jealousy, rivalry and envy among siblings (and later school children) are reversed into demands for justice and fairness. For Freud, all must be equally loved by the father or his substitute; no-one must have more than a fair share. Maybe Amanda's insistence that they took turns to speak and stuck to the remit of the task was a way of trying to make sure that all of them received the praise and affirmation from the teacher and from me. If one person dominated, that individual would selfishly be taking too great a share of the group's resources. In this event, group relations of dependency would be jeopardized by envy.

Concluding thoughts

In chapter three I explored the ethical dilemmas of conducting this research. I focused on the issue of whether it is unethical for a research participant to experience distress and I also considered the ways in which the researcher might 'contain' difficult feelings that surface in interview. Bailey's tears alarmed me. I turned off the recorder when he started crying and offered comfort in the form of a hand on his arm. I think I wanted to affirm that he was not alone and that he could depend on me, even if I had not necessarily proved this through the group experience. We ended the interview there; it was lunchtime and fortuitously here there was a chance for some 'reparative' work in the group (I, for one, was feeling guilty and troubled). I went into the school dinner hall to eat; Amanda came to sit with me of her own accord and soon after Bailey joined us. This act of sitting together held poignancy. I sensed that both children needed to know that they could survive this experience and be able to carry on with their day. The familiar and intimate experience of sharing a meal together helped provide an opportunity for containment, comfort and healing.

What I find hard to write about is the way I acted within this group. In chapter five I considered the ways in which I did not prove to be the leader the group wanted to depend on, when working with Mahad, Aaliyah, Shanise and Jarek. Perhaps Mahad's combative nature in this group was a reaction to his previous experience of being with me. This time he was ready for battle. In many ways I engaged in this battle with him and positioned Amanda to join me in this 'fight'. When I felt constrained by my position as researcher, I invited her to take on the attack and tell Mahad how he was making her feel. What I would emphasise is that these were not conscious decisions that I took. My understanding is that I was unconsciously colluding with and at times resisting the group mentality and culture. I want to suggest that unconscious dynamics will affect the relationship that the researcher has with the research participants (or the teacher with the class). I long to be seen as the 'good' researcher/teacher and show how perfectly and insightfully I asked questions and followed through children's responses. However I understand this to be a fantasy. Instead I have chosen to occupy the uncomfortable position that shows my flaws, my anxieties and my defences.

I have focused on the way Amanda appeared to be positioned by the two dominant boys in the group, because I felt I could relate to her position. I find it much harder to think about the group from the boys' perspective precisely because my own subjectivity is implicated. In identifying with the 'nice girl' position of Amanda, I used the power invested in my teacher role to suppress what I perceived to be unfair domination from Bailey and Mahad. I was constructing my own femininity in relation to their dominance and fighting against the powerlessness that I had experienced for myself growing up as a girl. However, when Bailey started crying I had an overwhelming desire to show him care and nurturance. His tears made him vulnerable and seemed to strip him of the power that I had previously attributed to his position. Perhaps his tears were because he needed the 'teacherly' (motherly) care and affirmation that I had denied him. My own processes of identification with the group were fluid and shifting. I acted out contradictory and competing roles within the group, exerting my power in a forceful way and yet wanting to also show my nurturing, motherly side.

Chapter Eight

Discussion of findings

The aim of this research has been to provoke and stimulate new ways of thinking about collaborative learning that eschew quick and easy explanations. I want to think about some of the unconscious fantasies that teachers and pupils might hold about group work and the ways in which these fantasies might act as defences against anxiety and also possibly contribute to anxiety. Although my data is from the perspective of children, this research is intended to be used with communities of teachers, starting with those in my own school. It is possible that an awareness of the unconscious dynamic within groups might help provide my colleagues and other teachers with a language and framework to think and talk about the difficulties with collaborative learning in the classroom.

There is a danger of rationalising the data to tell a neat and coherent story; this would run counter to the very theory upon which this thesis is based. I have therefore not attempted to analyse themes that have 'emerged' from the data, rather the themes I present here are constructed through the theoretical framework. I use my data to consider the relevance of these themes to classroom practice and also refer to data from my Institution Focused Study (Edmondson, 2001) to add to the basis of evidence upon which I draw. I realise my data set is limited, nevertheless I hope my stories of group work produce in the reader a sense of recognition that they could have experienced the events being described here.

The structure of the discussion of my findings is based upon my research questions to enable an exploration of:

- How the children dealt with the explicit task set by the teacher;
- The fantasies children (and their teachers) might hold about group learning and what these might suggest about unconscious anxieties in relation to group work.

How the children worked to deal with the explicit task that had been set by the teacher

Each group that I observed made an effort to engage with the task at some level, although perhaps this is of little surprise given that I was observing them. In chapter six I looked at how Daniella, Salma, Esther and Naima fragmented a task into its component parts of counting individual squares; they did not address the explicit task of finding a relationship between the sequences of squares. The concern of each girl appeared to be filling in the results on their own recording sheet and there was little to distinguish this as the collaborative activity that the teacher had hoped for. In the maths task that Arwa, Lauren, Malika and Gita worked on (chapter four), they too were able to deal with the basic computational skills of extending a number sequence, but they struggled to think about the pattern of results. Although there was more interaction between the girls, they chose to divide the task so that individuals worked on their own part of the task rather than coordinate with each other. When Mahad, Jarek, Shanise and Aaliyah worked on the History task (chapter five), they initially tried to negotiate meaning from the photographic evidence, but soon Mahad appeared to take control at the expense of the involvement of the others. In the end decisions were taken in an ad-hoc fashion and there seemed to be a lack of shared understanding. Perhaps it was the English task where the group showed the greatest promise of being able to think creatively; however their debate about the issues of a 'one-child policy' was not sustained for long and arguments ensued over whose turn it was to talk.

It seems to me that these groups found it difficult to move beyond the routines of the task and think at a more conceptual or creative level. This appears to corroborate other observational evidence of group work in the classroom; for example Galton et al. (1999) found that on the occasions when pupils were engaged in task-related interactions, the talk between pupils often involved the basic level of exchanging information rather than discussing ideas. Socio-cultural research provides us with the view that the nature of the task itself might inhibit or foreclose negotiation of meaning through being too ill-defined, closed or routine (e.g. Cohen, 1994; Barnes and Todd, 1977). Research also indicates that individual children's

situated cognitive capabilities constrain the type of collaborative relationship they are able to form with other group members (e.g. Cobb, 1995). But to what extent might children find it difficult to move beyond the routines of the task, not because of the range of academic ability in the group nor because the task is too tricky or too poorly structured, but because looking for connections and developing meaning would require children to engage in the type of thinking that requires emotional involvement?

Back in chapter two I explained how Bion (1962) linked thinking and feeling. He suggested that babies need considerable help from their mothers in thinking about and making sense of their experiences of the world; thinking occurs in relationship with another. In healthy development the baby's experience of being thought about and understood by the mother becomes the foundation for being able to tolerate the difficulties of thinking for oneself. This is the basis of what Bion termed the container-contained relationship. From this theory you could argue that the ability of a group to take risks with learning and to think creatively depends on the potential of the group to hold and transform unconscious anxiety; a work group state therefore relates to a sense of (even momentary or fleeting) emotional security.

When there is a failure in the container-contained relationship, the baby is subject to anxiety, surrounded by fragmented, chaotic and persecutory elements of unprocessed and uncontained experience. Against such anxiety, thinking cannot be tolerated. Nitsun (1996) describes how a group that lacks intra-group relatedness is unable to function as an actual unit. Elements of uncontained experience circulate in the group (for example, hostility, anxiety and envy). In this situation *basic assumption* behaviour takes over to preserve the group, yet this is at the expense of personal and group development.

Of the basic assumption behaviours, *dependency* was the one that was most in evidence in my research. Lauren depended upon Malika for answers; Daniella and Naima likewise looked to Esther to give them a number to record on their sheet

and in the history task I sensed that it was me upon whom the group were looking to depend. This relationship of dependence is a common feature of classroom life, where anxious pupils who know they must pass tests and exams, look to the teacher to spoon-feed them the knowledge that they need (Bibby, 2010). But this marks the difference between what Bion (1962) termed 'learning about' (amassing information about a subject) and 'learning from experience' (a genuine emotional link to what is being studied). It seems Lauren did not want to understand what the number strings meant or how they linked together, nor did Daniella and Naima appear interested in what they could begin to understand about algebra; furthermore a set of photographs of roman relics did not stir the group into considering how life in Britain today was built upon the foundations of this empire. Tasks remained fragmented and bits of knowledge unconnected, much like the inter-(un)relatedness within the groups.

When anxiety is in ascendance, learning is difficult. Bion would contend that learning invites considerable risk to the self; new ideas might feel overwhelming, particularly if new knowledge unsettles and disrupts all that had previously been held as certain. If these Year 5 children did not always demonstrate critical engagement or challenge each other's ideas, then maybe this needs to be understood as defence against anxiety. Likewise when pupils came across as showing contempt for the ideas of others, with words to the effect of 'I know best', there is the possibility of seeing this as a fantasy of omnipotence, to drive away the fear of actually not knowing.

It is worth reiterating that a group is not fixed in either its 'work group' or 'basic assumption' state. These states are mobile, with movement between them in a single group experience. My focus on aspects like 'dependency' within the group is not to suggest that positions in the group were determined for the duration; my intention has been to provide an indication of what I interpreted as the dominant defensive behaviours.

The fantasies children (and teachers) might hold about group learning and what these might suggest about unconscious anxieties in relation to group work.

In the introduction to this thesis I described how individuals invest in fantasies in order to defend against difficult thoughts. I drew on psychosocial research to illustrate some of the fantasies that teachers might invest in, for example that of the 'perfect teacher' (Britzman, 2009); the fantasy of his/her omnipotent power (Shaw, 1995); the fantasy of a curriculum that will 'deliver' learning (Bibby, 2010) against measures that present fantasies of the 'normative development' of the child (Walkerdine, 1988). In this section I want to consider the fantasies that teachers might hold about group learning and the experiences of pupils that might collude or conflict with these illusions. I will explore four fantasies: a) trouble-free transitions; b) an objective task; c) relational closeness and d) the nurturing helper.

The fantasy of 'trouble-free' transitions

It strikes me that many of us teachers imagine the business of forming groups to be an emotion-free process; it seems that there is often an expectation that children should effortlessly make the transition between different types of groups. In the class that I researched, the children worked as a whole class or individually for much of the school day, even though they were often seated at tables together; however there were lessons, like the ones I observed, where the teacher expected them to work as a group. The rationale for her decisions about group composition was not explained to the class. In one lesson she asked them to stay in their table groups; in another lesson she devolved responsibility for finding groups to the children; in the other two lessons the teacher herself created new groups for the purpose of the task, although it was not necessarily apparent how she decided upon these groups. The children were expected to move swiftly into their groups; there did not appear to be any allowance of time for the children to settle into the group, since the teacher's instruction was that they immediately set about the task that had been set. 'Stop fussing and get on with the work' is a familiar refrain that I know I have used on many an occasion. But perhaps we are not acknowledging the considerable anxiety that might be involved for pupils around group membership.

Biddy Youell (2006) writes about the potential difficulty that a child may face in having to cope with such a complex series of group settings in school. Commenting on an individual case, she gives the example of a typical school day, by describing all the different groups that one boy would probably be part of, from whole school assemblies, through to playground groups, ability groups and whole class sessions:

[W]e see that the boy has to be able to move from small groups to large groups, from groups that are led by a teacher to groups that have no appointed leader; from groups that have a clearly defined task to groups that are little more than a random cluster of individuals. (p.106)

Youell comments that the child needs to have a fairly robust sense of who he is, what contribution he can make to each group of which he is part, and what he can learn in each group situation. She highlights the double-dose of anxiety that the child may experience, for not only does he have to manage his own anxiety about learning, but he must also cope with anxiety about group membership.

I think we underestimate the emotional work, albeit largely unconscious, that is required of pupils to work out their sense of belonging within any given group. Traditionally we think of a group as comprised of a set of individuals, but perhaps we can appreciate the difficulties of group membership if we consider that the boundaries between self and the group are blurred. Here I draw on the work of Winnicott (1971) and his idea of 'transitional space'. He described what happens between the mother and the baby and the blurred, indeterminate 'space' between them. The mother, by intuitively anticipating and adapting to the baby's immediate physical needs, allows the infant to build up the illusion that it creates that which its mother provides; as soon as the baby cries, the mother responds. The baby imagines that it is merged with the mother. But Winnicott tells of the time that inevitably comes when the mother does not respond immediately and at this point the baby has to learn to deal with the frustration. To survive the anxiety, the infant might endow an object (a toy or a blanket, for example) with the capacity to bring about comfort. The object stands for something that is not self, but yet it is still wholly under the omnipotent control of the baby. Neither 'me' nor 'not me', the object

exists in the space between two people, from which the baby can begin to learn about its own subjectivity and also objective reality, with an awareness of separateness between itself and desired objects. The object enables the child to have a fantasised bond with the mother when she gradually separates for increasingly longer periods of time. In time the child comes to realise that the mother is separate from self.

Perhaps it is possible to take this idea of merging and separation and think about the group as a 'transitional space', where there is an interplay of the 'me' that is merged with the group and the 'me' that is not merged. Lucey (2010) describes how the work of identification includes unconsciously internalising our encounters and relationships with others, which then become deeply fused with our own subjectivity. This is a process of developing awareness of how we are similar to others and how we are different. Lucey draws on Klein's idea of 'splitting' and Bion's term of 'undigested' psychic material to describe how we psychically project 'unwanted' aspects of self onto others to construct defensive boundaries between self and other. Here identification is seen to operate across difference, but this very difference marks symbolic categories and what it means to belong. This process of establishing boundaries involves the complex web of social categorisations, including gender, race, ethnicity and aspects like academic ability.

Maybe friendship groups potentially work more harmoniously and productively than non-friendship groups (Barnes and Todd, 1977) because they operate across notions of 'sameness'; the 'me' that is merged with the group is greater than the 'me' that is not merged. 'Sameness' might bring comforting feelings of merger within safe and trusted groups. Single-sex groups, compared to mixed-sex groups, could also be viewed in this way. Many of the children reported that they enjoyed working with their friends, but when the teacher let them choose their own groups, this situation seemed to heighten the potential pain and hurt of feeling separated from the very group one desired to belong to. To illustrate this point I want to draw on the words of Malika:

Well if Miss Lane tells us to go in a group and like choose it, we say 'yes! We can choose our groups'. But now if my friends get taken away [...] I'm going to be like 'ah, that's not fair' and then after I'm going to get sad [...] If all my friends are already chosen in groups and I'm going to be like what's happened to my friends, where did they go? Did they go to someone else? What about me, what about me?

I think Malika articulated well the other side of the fantasy about the ease of group formation – the fear of being left out. If friends choose to work in another group to me, there is always the possibility that they will create new friends and suddenly I will no longer have a place in their friendship circle. The sense of loss is psychically significant in these instances and is not to be dismissed lightly.

Perhaps we invest in a fantasy of ease of transition between different groups, because we do not want to think about the pain of separation from the group. Winnicott presented the idea that when the child comes to realise that the mother is separate from self, it appears that the child has lost something. Feeling separate from the group can be a terrifying and painful experience. I only need remember the speed with which the teacher placed Lauren in a group; it seems that this girl standing alone in the room presented a troubling image of loneliness that the teacher quickly needed to solve, through placing her in a group of 'friendly' girls. It could be that Lauren embodied the anxiety of being left all alone that each of us would rather defend against. I am also reminded of the group with Daniella, where she repeatedly urged the others to 'stick together'. These four girls, who did not normally spend time together, appeared to be imbued with the anxiety about not connecting with each other. Their willingness to accept each other's ideas without critical judgment indicated that they needed to create some illusion of being 'one'. In such circumstances I imagine that relationships of dependence become all the more important, since individuals need to experience a sense of being merged with another.

The fantasy of an objective task

The task that the teacher presents the group to work on is typically treated as an independent variable in research on collaborative learning. When children struggle

to collaborate, often it is the task that is considered to be the issue that needs addressing (Barnes and Todd, 1977). It seemed to me that the teacher of this class thought all the groups could work on the same task and produce the same outcome. Is this fantasy of objectivity to defend the understanding that outcomes cannot be controlled?

In the previous section I drew upon the theory of Winnicott and his concept of the 'transitional object'. He related this concept to a more general one of transitional phenomena, which he considered to be the basis of cultural experiences, for example appreciating art or literature. Transitional objects and phenomena, he said, are neither subjective nor objective but partake of both; we have both a personal relationship/encounter with transitional objects and a social and shared experience of them. Shaw (1995) argues that if we think about curriculum subjects as transitional objects, then different areas of learning can be understood as containers for feelings as well as symbols for the self. She uses this idea to think about the gendered responses to different subjects. Maths, for example, might be a container for anxiety for girls, who think that they are no good at the subject. Creative tasks might have more scope for giving expression to feeling and the perception might be that this suits girls more than boys. From this perspective, when children collaborate on a task, they are not only dealing with the 'objective' and explicit task requirements, but also their subjective, emotional responses. Different gendered responses to tasks might explain the tensions in the mixed-sex groups of my study (the history task and the English task) compared to the single sex groups (the two maths tasks). The task exists in the space between group members, from which individuals learn about their own subjectivity and also objective reality and always this is in relation to the 'other'. Perhaps the reluctance of some group members to engage with the learning in the group is because they cannot cope with what the task signifies about self.

Winnicott (1971) describes how the infant needs to have some experience of magical control over the transitional object, in place of where he/she experienced omnipotence, in the psychic sense, over the mother. Important in this process is the

act of playing, for here there is interplay between the objective and the subjective. Play is outside the individual (the child can manipulate and control events/objects), but it is not the external world (it is part of the child's imagination). For Winnicott play forms an important part of the development of the infant from being in a state of complete dependence to growing independence. As teachers, we often define clearly how we want the group task to be done, particularly when we are subject to expectations that children be 'engaged' with learning at all times. We might become anxious and irritated when children re-define the task or 'muck about' with the resources. But perhaps children need this time to 'play' and experiment. Far from being 'unproductive', perhaps 'play' has a crucial role in stimulating group members to use the space in an imaginative way, loosening up their anxieties and creating spontaneous moments, which might actually free the development of the group. The children might experience a sense of control over events, rather than potential helplessness in relation to a learning task that feels impossible or fills them with anxiety.

The fantasy of relational closeness

Socio-cultural research draws attention to the importance of the relationship between group members as they interact together. For example, Azmitia and Montgomery (1993) show how the relational closeness of friends can help mediate joint activity, since there is a premise of trust and mutuality that can be built upon. A 'relational closeness' (with lack of threat among peers) is associated with effective sharing of ideas, exchanging points of view, and a collective approach to challenging tasks.

How might an idealised image of group 'closeness' affect our expectations of collaborative learning? The words that are used in the literature are those of 'trust', 'sharing' and mutuality', which together paint a rather cosy picture of group work, where group members 'feel at one with each other'; a fantasy perhaps of being 'nicely' merged. Even the term 'relational group working' draws on the metaphor of family. Perhaps it is the original bond of mother-child that is being called upon here. Consider the image of the idealised mother: she becomes completely absorbed with

the infant, intuitively understanding what it wants and giving over endless time and space to pay attention exclusively to its needs (Bibby, 2010). Like the perfect mother- child dyad, the perfect group selflessly share their ideas with each other and give focussed attention to meeting the learning needs of the group, all within an atmosphere of complete harmony.

It seems to me that this image of group work is there to defend against aspects of relationship that trouble us. For example, how do we deal with other emotions that are linked to 'close relationships', like envy, sexual desire, rivalry and aggression? Or what if close relationships stray beyond the remit of learning and enter into the territory of 'play'? Indeed a common criticism that is levelled at group work is that children discuss their own interests at the expense of focusing on the task (e.g. Galton et al., 1980; Bennett & Cass, 1988; Kutnick & Rogers, 1994). We would encourage mutuality in the group, but not when it involves discussing what has just happened in the playground, sharing a joke together or generally enjoying what might be termed 'messaging about'.

Versions of groups being 'nicely' merged are set against groups that are considered to be 'naughtily' merged. It seems that we might split off and label as 'bad' those aspects of group behaviour that trouble the cosy, 'nice' image of collaboration. For example, teachers might locate this 'badness' with particular individuals in the classroom: *'Teachers hold the view that some pupils, particularly boys, will misbehave during group work and that this will adversely affect others and the quality of group work and its performance'* (Baines, Blatchford and Chowne, 2007, p. 665). Through splitting, interactions in the group become reduced to a set of good/bad positions: 'productive' or 'unproductive', 'on task' or 'off task'. The children that I interviewed seemed all too aware of this fine line that they must tread, where aspects that they enjoyed, like laughing with friends, might be judged by teachers as problematic in terms of 'task-focused' group work:

It's kind of distracting sometimes because like your friends they are in the playground and you play with them and then sometimes the maths is there but sometimes it just goes to a completely different subject. (Gita)

You say a joke and people start laughing and then people start coming up with more jokes and more jokes. By the time you say 'ok, come on we have to get on with our work', it's finished, it's play time and then you have to stay in at play time and even when you're at the table doing your work in a group, then you start laughing again because you remember what you said last time and then the teacher has to keep you in another lunch time. (Mahad)

Although many of the children reported that they liked to work with their friends, they seemed to understand that the 'fun' to be enjoyed together meant it was perhaps less trouble to work in a 'non-friendship' group:

Its better when you are like with other people that are like your friends but you don't really hang around with them, like so you can concentrate on your work. (Malika)

It seems that we want children to be friends within the group, just so long as they do not enjoy the activities of friendship when they should be working (even if it is the work on friendships that actually builds aspects like trust and mutuality). This resonates with the theory of Freud (1930), who argued that societies (and other groups) incite members to 'love thy neighbour', but enforce laws and taboos to ensure that libidinal instincts are regulated. Laws about marriage, for example, or taboos about incest serve to restrict the very instinct of Eros that is being called upon by society in the pursuit of harmonious group relations. In the same way teachers might impose ground rules for the group to avoid unmanageable expressions of feelings. Youell (2006), however, reminds us of the illusory and defensive quality of rules:

These rules are designed to enable the children to live in close proximity with each other as well as be able to learn, and it is vitally important that children have the security that a sensible set of rules provides. However, the imposition of rules in the classroom cannot provide complete protection from the impact of unconscious group processes (p. 111).

Rules might be set for the group about sharing resources, taking turns to talk and using polite forms of language, but these rules do not inoculate the group from the impact of unconscious processes, like aggression, envy and desire. For example, teachers might imagine that conversations in the group can be managed on the basis of a rule that institutes a turn-taking policy, but this fantasy covers over the reality that relationships are strongly emotive, affecting who is in a position to speak, and what can be permitted to be spoken.

The fantasy of the 'nurturing' helper

The giving and receiving of help is considered to be a central aspect of collaborative learning. If pupils are specific in their request for help and receive relevant and elaborated explanations in return, then, it is suggested, they will be able to apply the explanations to solve the problems for themselves, without assistance (Webb, 1989, 1991, Webb & Mastergeorge, 2003). This idea draws on Vygotskian models of learning, where the child learns to accomplish a task with the help of a more knowledgeable other, such as a peer or teacher. Gradually the more capable other provides less and less assistance, to the point where the child is able to achieve the task on his/her own. The Vygotskian model, which has resonances with the psychoanalytic development story told by Winnicott and Bion, was first developed in relation to how a mother helps a child (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) before it was transferred to the classroom situation. Perhaps this mother/child relationship is significant to the fantasy that the teacher might hold about expectations of pupil help. The ideal 'helper' in the group appears to be the child who possesses the maternal qualities of patience, control, nurturance and the ability to introduce learning effortlessly.

To an extent this view of 'help' was the one that Arwa and Gita seemed keen to show in the group. They wanted Lauren to be able to do the task for herself and so asked her graduated questions to assist her towards this point. It is questionable, however, as to whether they were doing this for its own rewards, or whether it was a performance for my benefit as observer. They complained to Malika when their attempts at help were thwarted by her desire to give Lauren the answers. Later

they explained that Malika had probably done this because she had grown impatient with waiting for Lauren to work out the maths. In this way they set Malika's impatience against their version of 'patient' help. But what if the recipient of help does not want to learn to do something for him/herself? In my IFS (Edmondson, 2010), I presented data about a group, where one boy, Ahmed, knew the answer to the maths problem, but he held back from telling the other boys in his group; instead he chose to ask them a series of incremental questions, so that they would be able to solve it for themselves:

Ahmed: I don't know if you guys know this but we were already going to get that box thing right but I just said let them think for themselves. I had it in my head, I knew what to do [...] I had it but I didn't let it out.

RE: Why not? Why did you keep it to yourself?

Yaoul: Because he was being greedy.

Ahmed: No, I thought it was more better if we just worked together because

Jack: /I know but we are working together and one of us knows the answer so you must say it.

[...]

Yaoul: we kept on shouting at each other and he could of just told us the answer and then it could have been done.

Harry: It took long. He could have told us the answer. He could have helped us work it out.

Ahmed: But I'd just go that's that, that's that and then we're done.

Harry: That's good.

Jack: Because you're helping us.

Ahmed: But you guys have got nothing to say. I'd just get it off you, put it on, we're done. You guys are like, what do we do? We've done nothing. Imagine I get the paper off you, I do the whole work and then we're done.....who'll get the credit? Me.

The form of help that Ahmed was offering was being firmly resisted by the other boys in the group. They considered it 'greedy' that he kept the answer to himself; it seemed he had resources to help the group but he was withholding what they needed. When the group is imbued with basic assumption behaviour, anxiety is

being defended against and group members just need 'answers'; they cannot tolerate the difficulties, frustrations and potential mistakes that come from the vulnerable position of learning to do something for oneself. This was seen with Lauren, who simply wanted to be told the answers to the maths task, and also with Daniella and Naima, who relied upon Esther to tell them what to write down on their worksheet. I wonder to what extent Esther felt she could not take the pressure of expectation to provide all that the others demanded. The leader of a dependent group might become frustrated with the control that other members exercise and their desire to experience success in a task as if it were 'magically' achieved by their own merit. Teachers and educationalists struggle to contend with situations when group members take over the task and just give each other 'answers'. In fact, teachers cite the dominance of one pupil at the expense of the learning of others as a reason that they do not continue with group work (Plummer and Dudley, 1993). It seems that the passivity of some pupils (being 'spoon fed' or 'freeloading') and the control of others disrupt our notions about relationships of learning in the group. Perhaps we do not want others to challenge our position as teachers as the ones who control the learning.

I think part of the issue might be that fantasies about help become infused with our primitive experiences of the parent/child relationship; notions of help become mixed with unconscious emotions about acceptance and love. If help is associated with the love of another, then the possibility of not receiving help places the individual in a precarious and vulnerable position. Furthermore, if the aim of help is to assist the individual towards accomplishing things for themselves, then this also carries psychic implications, resonating with the original state of being merged (with the mother) and learning to cope with a position of separation and independence. Perhaps the desire to be 'spoon fed' affirms for the child the continued presence of a reliable other, and this might be an altogether less terrifying prospect than being left to 'feed oneself'.

Concluding thoughts

From taking a view of the individual and the group as being inseparable, we can begin to appreciate the difficulties of group work in a more nuanced way. There will be many occasions in our classrooms when collaborative learning does not fulfil our expectations, when children are arguing instead of co-operating, or chatting instead of solving the task, or depending on one individual rather than thinking collectively. But if we accept the view that there is much emotional work involved for group members, at an unconscious level, then we can view these examples of behaviour as part of a process of relating to others and not a moment of catastrophe.

Through conducting this research, I am more sympathetic towards the frustrations, difficulties (and joys) of working with others in a group. Psychoanalytic theory has provided me with a framework through which to think about my actions towards the children and also their anxieties, needs and desires. For example, I can now see when I have colluded with a dependent group and their expectation of help and when I have let the children decide their own groups, because I have not wanted to take responsibility for the child who does not 'fit' into any group. I have also thought about when I have become angry with groups for not meeting my expectations, resulting perhaps in me moving individuals to work in other groups. I can begin to understand how I split off the aspects of group work that trouble me and project these anxieties onto specific groups that I have decided are 'bad'. Previously I do not think I gave a second thought to the psychic implications of actions like banishing an individual from a group, or splitting up a group of friends because I thought they were chatting too much. Now I am much more aware of the how such separations might affect individuals.

What would I change about my practice or recommend to others? Perhaps as teachers we can assist our pupils by providing a strong containing presence – offering a forum for groups in which the difficult thinking about collaborative working could hopefully be expressed and thought about. In some ways this would be a replication of the type of discussions that I held with groups after the lessons in my research. But then there is the difficult thinking needed to be done by the

teacher him/herself and this would need to be 'contained' institutionally; discussions about anxieties, successes and failures of group work could be shared with other colleagues and valued as a professional activity by senior management. Perhaps if we began to acknowledge the relevance of children's emotional experience when learning with others, conversations about group work might actually become more possible. I appreciate that this suggestion does not sit comfortably with an education system that is premised upon certainty, targets and outcomes; an appeal to that which is uncertain, irrational and vague will doubtless be resisted. Courage is required to change the way we talk about group work. Courage is required to learn from our experience.

I feel that this study has been a tentative foray into an area of research that could be developed in a far more detailed way. Primarily I think each case study could be taken to a deeper level. I have only touched upon aspects of social categorisation, like gender, race and ethnicity; I have not gone into details about the child's family or their background; I have only briefly mentioned how the children fared in other aspects of school. If I wanted to more fully understand relationships in the group and their psychic significance, then these aspects would all build towards that picture. Perhaps there would be value in taking more time to follow one group across different lessons, or one individual across different groups, to develop this more detailed view. There is a difference, however, between drawing on psychoanalytic theory and attempting to psychoanalyse the group. I am located firmly within the former position and I think there is a danger in treating the data as a form of psychoanalysis, if, for example, it was felt that there is a need to gather all the relevant details from a child's life. The distinction between the two positions must be firmly held.

Before embarking on this research, I was unfamiliar with psychoanalytic theory. Using it as a lens through which to understand my data and tell the stories of these four groups has been immensely rewarding. There have also been times when I have also felt disturbed by this different view of group work. I believe there is a place for this theory in teachers' understanding of classroom pedagogy; I know that the

theory is often difficult to access, but there are ways in which it can be mediated through examples from the classroom that teachers can relate to. In many ways I hope that this is what my stories of group work have achieved – a sense of being able to place oneself in the experiences that I have described and being able to think anew about one's own encounters with group work.

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