

The Role of Group Work in Careers Education and Guidance Programmes

Ruth Higgins & Jane Westergaard

The Careers Service Annual Report 1997/98 identified group work as an area of CEG practice requiring development:

'Group work is recognised as an important part of a careers education programme. Recent research has shown, however, that it is not always efficiently integrated into the overall programme of careers education and guidance, and its objectives are not always clear to careers advisers or careers co-ordinators' (DfEE, 1998).

These observations reveal that, despite its perceived value, group work continues to be an ill-defined and often poorly managed activity within CEG programmes. Our own experience as trainers and educators of CEG practitioners leads us to believe that the effective integration of group work into such programmes will continue to be 'patchy' unless two fundamental questions are addressed:

- What is 'group work' or what could it be?
- How can group work enhance CEG programmes?

In this article, we will offer some answers to these questions by drawing together elements of guidance theory and learning theory, and so attempt to create a clear concept of, and vocabulary for, group work practice.

What is 'group work'?

The term 'group work' tends to be applied to a wide spectrum of group activity within CEG programmes – for example:

- Small groups formed within a class setting engaged in discrete activities which are then fed back into a larger group discussion.
- Information-giving sessions on specific topics.
- 'Fun' sessions – self-consciously different from 'lessons' and characterised by the use of 'games' which define the experience in contrast to formal 'learning'.

There is nothing wrong in principle with any of these approaches but why are they all defined as group work? It seems that the term is applied to any activity that deviates from the 'norm' of group learning experiences, i.e. lessons or lectures. It appears to have no greater meaning and this, in our view, has led to a lack of coherence and effectiveness.

There is a need to create conceptual clarity as a starting point to developing group work practice. So, if group work is an 'important part of a careers education programme' (DfEE, 1998), why and how is it important? What makes it a distinct activity in terms of aims, objectives, content and methods?

What could 'group work' be?

Our view is that group work within CEG programmes could and should be defined as a guidance activity; in style, content and aims, more similar to the one-to-one guidance interview than is currently the case.

Guidance group work would thereby have the following defining characteristics:

- The focus of the sessions would be on issues not merely on topics. This means that the planning and delivery of group work would be centred on key underlying questions, concerns and considerations in relation to any given topic.
- Sessions would include the opportunity for individual reflection on these issues.
- Sessions would be action-focused.

Although guidance group work can be similar to the one-to-one guidance interaction, it cannot be the same, or achieve identical outcomes, not least because the issues addressed during a group session are partly pre-determined by the facilitator in the planning stage. Of course, the key difference is the additional resource of the group itself, and it is this fusion of the group process and the guidance process which characterises our approach to guidance group work:

'This capacity concurrently to draw upon group processes, but to focus on personal experience, appears to be a key feature of successful group work' (Law, 1996).

Law conceptualises guidance group work in the terms we have described, but he does not explore in any more detail the function and form of group work specifically. So, how can credible, theoretically-based models for guidance group work be created if they do not already exist?

Searching within allied fields of research would seem to be an obvious starting point. Indeed, an examination of group theory, including Bion's work on group assumptions (Bion, 1948/51), and Hopson & Scally's work on approaches to careers education (Hopson & Scally, 1981), reveals perspectives which can usefully inform group work models. However, the context assumed in such fields of practice is quite different from that of guidance and therefore applicability is limited. For example, Bion's work on group assumptions relates to the dynamic of a group in a therapeutic context as it develops over a period of time, which, although it may be relevant to group work practice, does not provide the 'whole story'. Similar limitations are evident in writing on careers education which tends to be either curriculum-focused (e.g. 'How to' develop a CEG curriculum) or resource-oriented (e.g. 'How to' run a good lesson). Neither source offers the conceptual or theoretical framework to inform models for guidance group work.

However, two areas of research do provide directly relevant theoretical perspectives for the development of guidance group work. These areas are guidance theory and learning theory.

Guidance theory

An exploration of the theories underpinning guidance practice reveals that a variety of approaches are

adopted by guidance practitioners. Jenny Kidd (1996) usefully categorises these into four key 'orientations' ('person-environment fit', 'developmental', 'person-centred' and 'goal-directed'). Each of these orientations will take practitioners and, therefore, their clients in particular directions and, presumably, to different conclusions and outcomes.

Although wary of judging any one of these orientations as 'better' than the others (appropriateness, of course, being dependent on a range of factors such as context, client need, effectiveness of practitioner), it seems that the goal-directed orientation (adapted from Egan's helping model and featuring in most guidance training courses in the UK), is most complementary to guidance in a group context. Key characteristics of the goal-directed approach make it relevant:

- The focus is on the needs and issues of the client.
- The guidance practitioner is a 'helper' who does not have the 'right answers' for the client, but who is skilled in assisting the client to find the right answers for themselves.
- It emphasises the need for action, for clients to transpose the learning undertaken and conclusions reached to the reality of their lives outside the session.

Of course, neither Egan's original model nor Kidd's analysis of guidance practice assumes a group context, but application is possible – and worthwhile. For example, the three defining characteristics of goal-directed guidance, described above, could be adapted in the following ways:

- The needs of the group are anticipated when planning a session by designing activities which will enable group members to explore relevant issues; but the session will begin with group and facilitator agreeing an agenda so that adjustments can be made in line with the specific needs and experience of the group. This establishes from the start a client-centred approach, such that group members are fully involved participants in the process, aware of the objectives of the session and understanding its value and relevance to them.
- The facilitator will use guidance skills to create opportunities throughout the session for individuals to learn, focus and reflect on relevant issues. The group will be its own resource in this process, but the facilitator has a co-ordinating role, i.e. summarising key learning points as they emerge, sharing information to develop the work of the group, challenging the group by offering different perspectives.
- The facilitator will create opportunities for the learning achieved and the conclusions reached during the session to be applied to each individual. Group members will leave the session with specific ideas concerning the action they will take as a consequence of the group experience.

It is possible, therefore, to plan and deliver group work with the aim of meeting goal-directed guidance outcomes. In order for those outcomes to be achieved, however, approaches to learning which best accommodate a guidance process must also be adopted.

Learning theory

Approaches to learning which use the experiences, needs, values and beliefs of individuals within a group as a central resource, are those most conducive to the type of 'learning' characteristic of effective guidance. Several such models exist

and are worthy of review in this context, e.g. the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), the principles of student-centred learning (Brandes & Ginnis, 1986), the constructivist theory of learning (Peavy, 1998). All promote philosophies and methods to facilitate growth and understanding of the individual.

In particular, theories of adult learning provide a complementary and practical framework for managing the distinct 'learning' process of guidance in a group context. 'Andragogy' (Knowles, 1993) defines itself in contrast to traditional pedagogical methods and is premised on some key assumptions about adults as learners:

- That they are self-directed rather than dependent in their learning style.
- That adults will and should use life experience as a central resource for learning.
- That adults are motivated by the immediate application of learning – problem-centred rather than subject-centred.

Relevance to the group context is clear: learning in andragogical terms both draws on and informs the realities of an individual's life in all its aspects – social, political and economic. The concept of problem-centred rather than subject-centred learning relates directly to the 'issues' which drive the guidance process. In addition, the focus on immediate application of learning supports the action-oriented dynamic of goal-directed guidance.

Approaches that have been developed to create a very different learning experience to traditional models, seem to provide a framework which best accommodates the goal-directed guidance process. Perhaps this should come as no surprise. After all, the guidance process does equate to a unique learning experience and one that is relevant to younger people as well as adults.

How can guidance group work enhance CEG programmes?

In general terms, the approach to guidance group work described above would, we believe, create greater congruence between the aims and methods of CEG programmes. If the overall aim of a CEG programme is for individuals to develop self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision-making skills and transition skills (Law & Watts, 1977), then using guidance group work methods would help those individuals to 'sense', 'sift', 'focus' and 'understand' – the skills which Law believes are necessary to achieve the overall aim (Law, 1999).

Law's recent writing on careers work illustrates the need to do more than identify what a CEG programme should aim for, but also to consider how those aims can be achieved. Guidance group work could form an important part of the how – complementary to other aspects of the CEG curriculum, but to be used selectively, taking into account the following considerations:

- **The group.** As described above, guidance group work methods are participative, give group members considerable autonomy and require them to be reflective. Some groups and individuals may not be able or are not willing to cope with this approach, so preparation for learning in this way, coupled with skilled facilitation to support group members through the process, are important factors.
- **The context.** As a guidance activity, group work is most appropriately delivered at points of, or in preparation for, transition, change and decision-making, i.e. at times when guidance in other forms is considered to be useful.
- **The facilitator.** This approach requires a facilitator who is cognisant of the underpinning theories and outcomes that can be achieved. S/he will need to have developed a range of skills applicable to working within a guidance context. Whether this individual is a teacher, careers adviser, personal adviser or in some other role, matters less than their understanding of, and skills in, guidance group-work facilitation.

Overall, successful integration of this approach within CEG programmes requires there to be a shared vocabulary between all 'stakeholders' so that group members, facilitators and curriculum managers have a common understanding of the defining characteristics of guidance group work, what is involved, and why it is worthwhile.

Conclusion

Our assertion that there is a place within CEG programmes for guidance-oriented group activity is not intended to negate or replace any of the well-established elements which are traditionally included. Rather, it fits with the current focus on methods for delivering effective CEG curricula and proposes that the divide between education and guidance activities need be neither rigid nor vast.

In these times of the 'differentiated' core curriculum, is there not an argument for the same approach to the delivery of CEG programmes? The introduction of learning mentors in schools and the advent of the personal adviser role suggests the need for CEG programmes and services in and beyond compulsory education which are more responsive to individual needs. The provision of extra guidance group work sessions which address the needs of individuals who are 'in need' or 'at risk' is one way that this approach could be integrated into and enhance existing CEG programmes.

References

- Bion, W. R. (1948-51). 'Experiences in groups'. *Human Relations*, Volumes 1-7.
- Brandes, D. & Ginnis, P. (1986). *A Guide to Student Centred Learning*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- DfEE (1998). *The Careers Service Annual Report 1997/98*. Sheffield: DfEE.
- Egan, G. (1997). *The Skilled Helper* (5th Edition). Monterey: Brooks/Cole.
- Hanson, A. (1996). 'The search for a separate theory of adult learning: does anyone really need andragogy'. In Edwards, R., Hanson, A. & Raggatt, P. (eds.): *Boundaries of Adult Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Hopson, B. & Scally, M. (1981). *Lifeskills Teaching*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill.
- Kidd, J. (1996). 'The career counselling interview'. In Watts, A.G. et al.: *Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance*. London: Routledge.
- Killeen, J. & Kidd, J. (1991). *Learning Outcomes of Guidance: A Review of Recent Research*. Research Paper No.85. Sheffield: DfEE.
- Knowles, M. (1986). 'Andragogy: An emerging technology for adult learning'. In Edwards, R., Hanson, A. & Raggatt, P. (eds.). *Boundaries of Adult Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning - Experiences at the Source of Learning and Development*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs.
- Law, B. & Watts, A. G.(1977). *Schools, Careers and Community*. London: CIO.
- Law, B. (1996). 'A career learning theory'. In Watts, A.G. et al.: *Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance*. London: Routledge.
- Law, B. (1999). 'Career-learning space: new DOTS thinking for careers education'. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 27(1), 35-54.
- Peavy, J. (1998). 'A new look at interpersonal relations in counselling'. *Educational and Vocational Guidance Bulletin*, 62/98.

For correspondence

Jane Westergaard, Centre for Career and Personal Development, Canterbury Christ Church University College, Salomons Centre, Broomhill Road, Southborough, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN3 0TG