



Reflective accounts

Building trust and enhancing belonging

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October 2010

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The need for support

In her role as a Behaviour Support Teacher in a Local Authority working in an inner city in England, she was referred to a primary school to help teachers and support staff manage the challenging behaviour of a girl in year 6 (final year of primary school). The teacher was new to the school though highly experienced. In her previous job she had been commended for her skills in teaching the most challenging children. Her class was a mixed group of year 5's and year 6's [nine to eleven years olds]. Names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

In our first consultation meeting, the teacher described Nikki as a child with whom it was extremely difficult to build a relationship as she continually disregarded instructions and was openly disrespectful. Nikki wanted to be treated like everyone else but she rejected reward systems that other children with challenging behaviour often responded to. However, there was nobody else in the school whose behaviour was like Nikki's, in fact she could quickly turn violent and dangerous, threatening the safety of the other children in the classroom. As a result a risk assessment had been carried out and a handling policy put in place.

Nikki's early childhood had been traumatic and disrupted as she spent a period of time in care whilst her mother struggled to overcome drug dependence. Although this episode in care was brief and she was returned to her mother, their relationship continued to be difficult and required support from the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Support (CAMHS) Team.

In our first consultation session, we reflected on how Nikki's early childhood experience might have impacted on her ability to develop trusting relationships with adults. This seemed to help the teacher stand back and understand better the push/pull dynamic to Nikki's relationship with her as well as the difficulties Nikki had with her peers. What was needed, I believed, was an intervention that could help her to develop a deeper sense of belonging within the class system. In fact, given the complex nature of the mix of children in the class and the teacher's recent arrival, this approach seemed to have the potential to benefit everyone in the system.

What I did

Initially I met with Nikki's teacher and her learning mentor and I introduced them to a range of systemic learning tools and approaches. Together, we considered which ones had the greatest potential to help. Our aims for the intervention were to:

- support the children to build a greater sense of belonging to their class
- develop their understanding of what it means to belong to a group
- help them grow in their understanding of how their actions affect others and the overall climate for learning

The intervention would take place over six weeks, for an hour each week with the whole class. It was agreed that I would facilitate the sessions along with another colleague. The teacher and learning mentor would take part in the sessions and support the management of the group where needed. The sessions were timetabled for the end of the afternoon session, which enabled the four of us to meet to debrief and discuss any issues that had arisen from the work. We realised very quickly how important this reflection time was as the work had a very powerful impact, particularly on Nikki.

Each of the sessions started and ended with the same rituals. The activities at the start of the session included a review of the ground rules, checking in using the Feelings Wall and a warm-up game using a beanbag (to allow everyone in the group to receive and throw the bag to someone else). The session always ended with a stilling exercise. Over the course of the six weeks the other systemic learning activities that were used were: groupings, the spider's web, the group mobile, secret friend and 'special person', in addition to some other activities from the traditional PHSE¹ such as people bingo and a feelings journal.

¹PHSE education stands for Personal, social, health and economic education. It is a planned programme of learning opportunities and experiences that help children and young people grow and develop as individuals and as members of families and of social and economic community. PSHE education is currently a non-statutory part of the curriculum in England but most schools choose to teach it because they find their pupils benefit from learning how to lead healthy lifestyles, manage their feelings, build positive relationships and become financially capable.

How the children responded

Although I'd heard a lot about Nikki, I didn't actually meet her until the first session, when she introduced herself to me by saying, 'Who the hell are you?' Her behaviour in the session became unsettled and disruptive at times, perhaps communicating her anxiety about new people and new systems. At the end of the session, children were given a feelings diary and asked to reflect on the range of feelings they'd experienced that day. Nikki recorded feeling angry in all sessions and her immediate peers commented that she always seemed angry. The next day, Nikki verbally threatened her teacher and was excluded. One of the outcomes after reflecting on Nikki's response to this activity and her subsequent behaviour, was that the level of support Nikki received from her learning mentor was increased and the support incorporated some one-to-one time to help her express the feelings of anger she carried around with her.

In the second session, Nikki was much more respectful of others. She listened attentively to the other children describing how they were feeling, but didn't feel able to identify how she was feeling herself. She became really engaged in the people bingo activity and made a new connection with another child whom she discovered, from this game, played in a football team.

By the third session Nikki was able to identify a positive feeling for herself and express what was contributing to this feeling to the whole group. She was also able to help others who were demonstrating increasing confidence in using the group to share more uncomfortable feelings.

For example, Nikki responded to a boy's request for some help from the group as he didn't know how to tell his mum he had a detention, by sharing her own experience of being in trouble and advocating that honesty was the best policy! In the groupings activity Nikki took a very significant risk in her learning, using the opportunity to explore and express issues of identity. When the category of gender was called out, Nikki physically hesitated when deciding which group to align herself to and verbalised in front of the whole group that she was a tom-boy² and she felt allegiances to both groups. The class respected her disclosure and she eventually found her place within the girls' group after a discussion about gender stereotypes.

²A tomboy is a girl who exhibits characteristics or behaviours considered typical of the gender role of a boy, including the wearing of typically masculine-oriented clothes and engaging in games and activities that are often physical in nature, and which are considered in many cultures to be the domain of boys.

Perhaps the most significant shift in Nikki's developing trust and deepening sense of belonging to the group occurred in the fifth session. For the first time, Nikki named a difficult feeling she was experiencing and took the courage to share why and receive support from the group in managing her feelings. Afterwards, she offered positive feedback to others, including myself saying that it was a shame there was only one session left of the project.

Outcomes

In the weekly debriefing sessions about the work, the class teacher reported gradual, positive movements in her relationship with Nikki. At first she noticed that Nikki was seeking her out more often to show her work to her, taking much more pride in its appearance. By the end of the project, there was a noticeable reduction in incidents of conflict inside and outside the classroom and an increase in occasions when Nikki was able to share difficult feelings with adults. This change was not only noted by school staff, but also by other professionals who worked with Nikki up to five months after the intervention had finished.

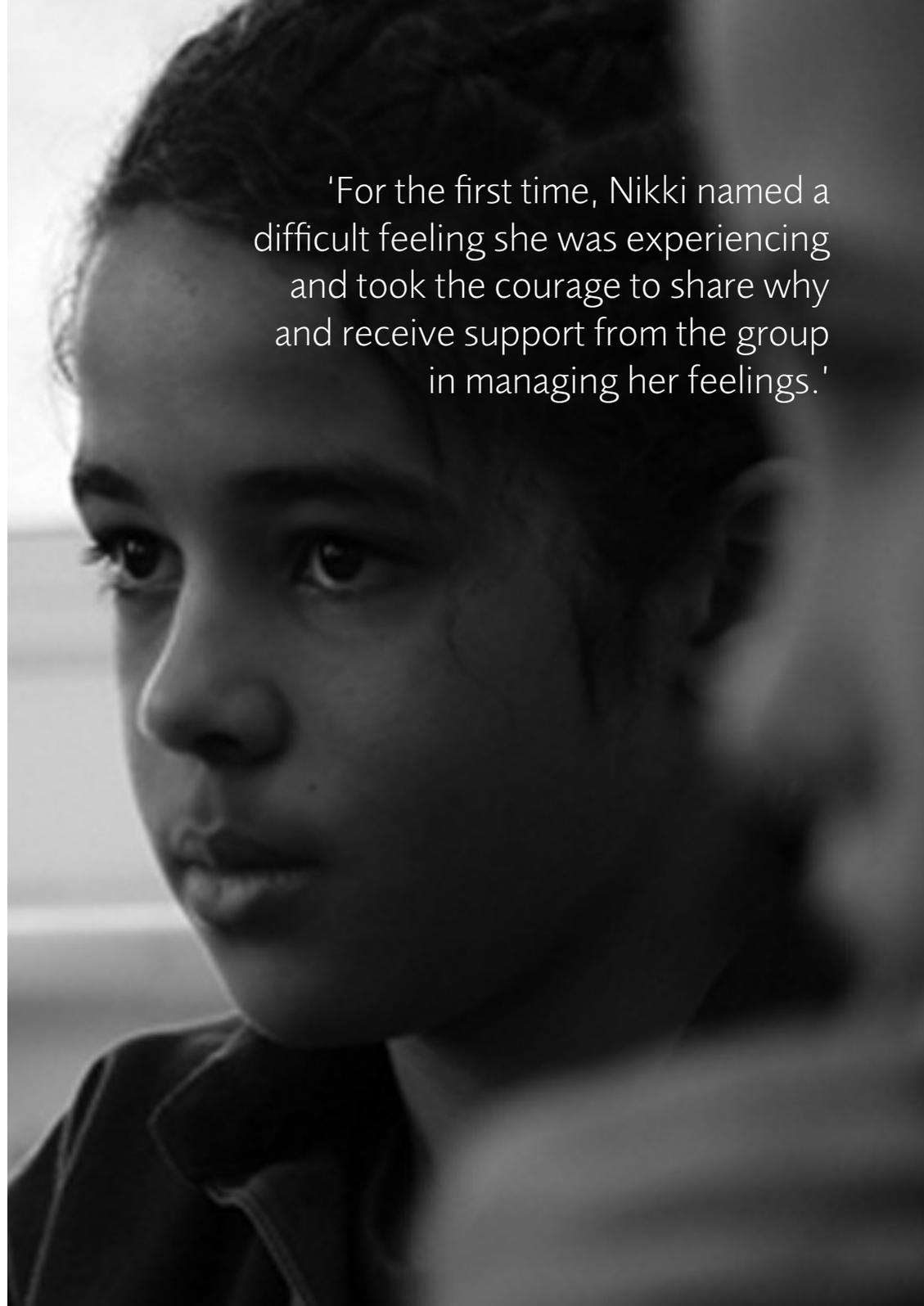
The teacher continued to use a selection of the systemic tools with the whole class after the project had ended. The feelings wall was kept in the classroom and became particularly useful to support all the children in expressing their feelings about the transition to year 6 or on to secondary school. Other teachers in the school have also introduced their own feelings walls. The 'special person' activity was also often referred to and used to support pupils' confidence when they noticed they felt stuck with their class-work. The warm up game, using bean bags has been used within literacy sessions and the class teacher reports that the activity has helped increase the confidence of less able pupils as learning feels part of a game that they're already good at and these pupils are now less embarrassed about speaking in front of the whole class.

In the initial session, all the pupils in the class completed a scaling exercise to help them think about their own sense of belonging to their class. In the final session, the same exercise was used to establish if there had been any significant shift after completing the project. The results were overwhelming; 73% of the girls' sense of belonging increased, 27% stayed the same, 57% of the boys sense of belonging increased, 43% stayed the same. Whilst discussing this data with the class teacher, she noticed that those pupil's scores that had made the biggest leaps were pupils who struggled most with learning.

The class teacher hypothesised that by focusing on experiential, systemic and interpersonal activities, perhaps these pupils now felt less separate from their peers. This was certainly true of one pupil who wrote 'this programme was fun and helpful, it made me feel more involved.'

My sense is that this project supported a new teacher to develop a sense of belonging in a mixed-age group class. It also helped her with a child who was particularly vulnerable and whose behaviour as a result affected the climate for learning for everyone. The project in one class also spilled over into other classes in the school. The great thing about the systemic activities is that they are relatively simple to share with other teachers. I learnt from the project and I'd like to thank all the children and teachers I had the privilege to get to know in the course of it.

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