

HACKNEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE Output 3

Output 3 is a case study demonstrating an innovative approach to behaviour management instigated by the College Educational Psychologist (EP) involving a student with learning difficulties and his classmates on a mainstream Construction course, contributing to raised expectations. This Group Problem Solving approach is adapted from schools' Circle Time for younger learners and the case study includes guidance on the process and a video clip of individuals from the group giving feedback.

Context: Case study of Student J: Output 3a

J began studying at Hackney Community College in September 2010, having previously been a pupil at Horizon Special School. He initially joined the New Horizon 2 group of students with learning disabilities at the age of 17. It soon became apparent that J needed 1:1 support for a range of behaviours, including shouting, swearing, intimidating other students and leaving the classroom without permission. J presented as being a disaffected, often angry individual with a short attention span who sought to dominate social situations and disrupt classes to avoid engaging with set tasks for more than very brief periods.

As part of their person-centred, holistic approach staff identified several roots of J's behavioural difficulties and sought to address them through specific interventions. Firstly, a complex history of social care involvement in his family was felt to contribute to many of his issues, particularly around anger management and personal interaction. The input of the college's educational psychologist was enlisted in multi-agency meetings which also involved J's social worker, members of his family and his course tutor. These discussions sought to establish consistent guidelines and boundaries for J's behaviour both in college and at home. Such meetings, as well as regular dialogue via email, phone-calls and student-diary, were also important in keeping the tutor updated on developments in J's home-life and maintaining staff-awareness of how these would impact on his behaviour.

The EP and course tutor also collaborated on a Behaviour Management Programme for J, in which he was asked to discuss with the class-teacher at the end of each session how it had gone; the teacher would then write a comment and give a behaviour score on a 1-10 scale. The importance of J's contribution to the process was emphasised as a way of giving him ownership of the programme and a sense of responsibility about his behaviour. The weekly Behaviour Management sheets were also fed back to J's family so that a consistent pattern of appropriate rewards and sanctions could be carried through.

This was tied to individual sessions with the Educational Psychologist using cognitive-behavioural approaches which encouraged J to begin to understand how his thoughts, feelings and behaviour were connected. Through these sessions he reflected on his angry outbursts and tried to understand the thoughts that prompted him to feel angry. He was supported to think of coping strategies that he could use to reduce the impact of his angry feelings on others and experiment

with these approaches before reporting back on how they worked. This approach also brought in elements of emotional literacy, whereby he could begin to understand how his negative behaviours had made other students and staff feel.

A further root-cause of J's behavioural difficulties was identified as a mismatch between J's academic levels (derived from the initial assessment process) and those of the other members of the group, some of whom were significantly less able than him. Even though classroom work was differentiated to accommodate this disparity, it was felt that a progression to a higher level group would be beneficial for J and would push his learning forward in more challenging ways. It also related to the college's policy of integrating students with learning disabilities into mainstream courses. Still giving 1:1 Learning Support Assistant support from his discrete provision, J therefore progressed to an On Track course, and this proved successful in calming down his behaviour and furthering the reflective process that had begun with the Behaviour Management Programme.

Transition

To support this transition the Educational Psychologist was on hand to consult with the new mainstream class teachers. An initial consultation was carried out with the numeracy and Brickwork tutor during the first half term. The Learning Support Assistant had been able to identify that J was struggling to settle in. The Educational Psychologist observed the maths class, where it was seen that J was being non-compliant and verbally abusive towards the other students, although he was accessing the support for his learning and engaging with numeracy work at a more appropriate level.

A debrief following the observation session identified that the main frustration for the class teacher was in managing J's verbal aggression towards others. The Educational Psychologist hypothesised that J felt insecure in his position within the group, given he was the only one with 1:1 support and was trying to assert an identity for himself within the hierarchy of the class. It was suggested that the group needed to form a stronger group identity and discuss the issues that were preventing them from working successfully together. The Group Problem Solving (GPS) sessions were welcomed by the class teacher as a way to support this type of discussion.

The Group Problem Solving Sessions: Output 3b

Circle Time is a model, championed by [Jenny Mosley](#), as an approach to setting up and maintaining a positive class management system. It is used largely in primary and secondary schools to:

- Promote positive relationships
- Create a caring and respectful ethos
- Help students to develop self-esteem
- Promote social and emotional development

The Circle Time approach was adapted by the Educational Psychologist to encourage student participation and ensure there was the opportunity to celebrate success. Elements from the Circle of Friends approach (Newton, Taylor & Wilson (1996) were introduced to facilitate the group in taking the responsibility in generating for themselves solutions to problem situations.

The name of the sessions was changed to GPS be more reflective of the purpose and less synonymous with primary school settings. Coincidentally, sharing the acronym for satellite navigation (!), GPS was hoped to support students in finding and maintaining a metaphorical direction as a group.

The group followed a clear structure over an agreed time period (often just under an hour). The sessions were conducted during allocated lesson time and therefore it was expected that the students would attend as they would a curriculum-based class.

The Group Problem Solving sessions were a solution to:

- J.'s difficulties with settling into the mainstream class,
- transferring the behaviour management role from an adult to J, supported by his classmates,
- the group's acceptance of a student with learning difficulties,
- the formation of a group identity.

The first session established the ground rules of the sessions (selected largely by the students) and outlined the expectations for contributions. It was important to stress the expectation of confidentiality for the group. This information was repeated at the start of each session. The room was set up with chairs set in a circle, to facilitate ease of communication. J.'s Learning Support Assistant attended to support the Educational Psychologist in facilitating the session and contribute as someone who was present during lesson time and therefore had a perspective on things that were working/not working well.

Outline of an example session

GPS Session Outline

Attendees: *Note attendees. All present are able to contribute to the Circle equally, including support staff and the facilitator.*

1. Opening Circle: Topical Opening Discussion or game – *e.g. at the start of term the opener was "The best thing about the holidays was....."*

2. Since our last meeting:

- a) What have you been pleased to notice about yourself?
- b) What have you been pleased to notice about the group?
- c) How has it been possible to keep this area working well?

3. What do we need to work on now?

Students reminded of suggestions that were generated in previous week. E.g. from J.'s group week 1:

- *Feeling picked on*
- *Feeling angry*
- *Feeling frustrated*
- *Feeling irritated*
- *Feeling like one person gets more attention than others*

4. Or something else?

At this point all students were asked to contribute on an area they think the group needed to work on collectively. E.g. in session 2 the students chose to focus on their collective anxiety about the forthcoming exams and how they could make it possible for every member of the group to achieve; in session 3 they focused on the name calling, which had largely been instigated by J.

5. How will we know that there has been a positive change?

This question is taken from solution focused thinking and allows the students to imagine what their ideal situation may practically look like before thinking about the part each member of the group needs to play.

6. How can we get closer to achieving that? What is one thing you will do differently from tomorrow?

This question encourages students to generate ideas and then commit to doing something differently from the next day. This also gives permission for the other students to identify whether they see their classmate doing what they said they would do.

7. Closing Circle: Working together – e.g. throwing and catching

The closing Circle activity ends the discussion on a light-hearted and positive note and allows a demonstration of practical cooperation between the team; a practical embodiment of group problem solving.

8. Review to take place: Facilitator sets the next group slot.

Evaluation of Group Problem Solving by staff and students: Output 3c

Student Reflection

The students provided evaluation feedback at the end of each session. Comments given at the end of session 2 included:

“It was good to get to know each other better”.

“It feels like there is something we can do together to get better grades in our exams”.

“I never knew that S. played football outside of college!”

[Please see Video Clip 3c](#)

Staff reflection

The vocational course tutor gave feedback on how he feels the Group Problem Solving sessions have impacted on his class.

“I have taught students from Horizon over the last 8 years as part of ‘Links in Construction’, and continue to do so, but I am also aware that unless they have so much extra support once they progress onto a main stream course, then their progress is limited.

1. What is your understanding of the purpose of the GPS sessions held with the Educational Psychologist?

I think they are really productive but then they must be delivered by a professional.

2. Since the group began what impact, if any, have you noticed on J and/or the other students?

I have seen other kids displaying disruptive attention because of the time I spend challenging J. It’s damaging. The only way around this is again to provide massive support, and have lots more Circle time (GPS sessions) so the other members of the group can air feelings and hopefully learn to accept that some of us need a lot more support.

3. What do you think of the frequency of the sessions?

Not enough.

1. Would you like them to continue? If so, in what capacity. If not, why not?

Yes! Monthly?

2. What impact do you think this group has had on the behaviour of the students?

I think it's helping James but not necessarily the other students as they can find it frustrating and it hinders their learning, because in their eyes they don't really have to be there, unless of course it's used in a way so they can bring to the table their feelings, not only about how James fits in but discussing their personal issues.

The LSA gave feedback on how he feels the Group Problem Solving sessions have impacted on J and the class:

1. What are the challenges that mainstream teachers may face in trying to include students who were previously educated on the New Horizons group (i.e. those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities)?

An example of a challenge that a mainstream teacher may face is adjusting to the learning style of the student. A mainstream teacher has to have some understanding of the learning environment the student has transitioned from and integrate this into their teaching style but at the same time adhere to their own standards of work. Behavioural issues are another challenge that a teacher may face in trying to include new students.

2. What were the challenges in including J into the mainstream classroom?

One of the initial challenges was the level of concentration required to learn to do the task or learn a new skill. J found it difficult to concentrate on small tasks for prolonged periods of time which would help him learn the appropriate skills. Secondly, adjusting to working and collaborating as part of a group – socially, J found it difficult to get on with his peers in the classroom.

3. What is your understanding of the purpose of the GPS sessions held with the EP?

The 'Group Problem Solving' session gives the students the chance to reflect and give feedback in regards to their learning experience. Students are allowed to voice their opinions - positive and negative - about the group. If problems or needs arise the students have an organised opportunity to address and create a solution to solve these issues within the group.

4. Since the group began what impact, if any, have you noticed on J and/or the other students?

It has given J a structured opportunity to be able to hear from his peers their feelings and to understand why they have these feelings in the group. The session has allowed the group to talk about issues that may not necessarily be spoken about while in curriculum time. Interestingly enough, during the second session the students identified collectively a need for extra work in literacy. The group then came up with the idea to form a study group to help each other improve in areas where they have a need. I was really impressed by the initiative that the group took with this as from my personal observation I did not think the group would consider issues like this. So it has allowed them to demonstrate 'ownership' and 'engagement' in their education which is part of their development. At present I am a trainee teacher and I was so pleased with what the students did that I am using this as an

example of 'reflective practice' in one of my coursework assignments. J did not want to participate in the study group but he has observed how peers around him are starting to take action in their own education.

5. What do you think of the frequency of the sessions?

The sessions could be more frequent. As these students are only in 3 days. Certain issues could possibly be dealt with in a two week reflection period, rather than it under for half a term and then brought up in the session which can cause the students to be unsettled especially if a student feels they have improved.

6. Would you like them to continue? If so, in what capacity. If not, why not?

The sessions should continue as I feel it is an integral part of their development and understanding of the wider society. The students are able to demonstrate qualities and skills that they may need to draw upon when working in a team in employment. Part of a student's learning is the ability to be able to experience, reflect and apply solutions to problems and this gives them that opportunity so I feel it should continue for that reason. I feel a benefit in the sessions is for the EP to lead initially but then each member in the next sessions can take a turn to 'chair' the meeting as this could also allow them to promote fairness and leadership within the group.

7. Is there anything you would suggest as an improvement suggestion for the group to continue running or for the groups to run in another college elsewhere?

I feel the group could benefit from an extra-curricular activity that could bond the group together outside of the classroom setting. I was supporting J last year on a work skills programme and we had a session where the students went to the gym. From observation, the group enjoyed this as a chance to communicate and work together outside the class.

8. What impact do you think this group has had on the behaviour of the students and if so, how can the Educational Psychologist support in sustaining this impact?

The students have had an opportunity or the experience to deal with their peer's views and feelings which is a big part of their social development after college life. I feel the students have learnt to respect each other more, the sessions have given them a chance to understanding the reasons for certain behaviours so they can relate to their peers' feelings more. The session is done in an informal way with the Educational Psychologist but the students take more ownership in the discussions. The Educational Psychologist provides significant help if the students are finding it difficult to come to a common solution for a problem and also to introduce questions that may stimulate the student to view issues from different perspectives.

Educational Psychologist reflection

The sessions appeared to provide an opportunity for group discussion that was not available at any other time of the day for this group. The most pleasing thing for me to see over time was the way the group took ownership of their direction and began seeing similarities between themselves and each other. For example, one of the students remarked that J was very lucky to have Learning Support Assistant support as he felt he also had additional learning needs and hadn't received any

additional learning support (ALS) in college. The group had felt safe enough for this student to disclose this information, having not mentioned this on his enrolment form. We were able to think through a solution for him where he could approach the Access and Inclusion manager, supported by J if necessary. This then re-positioned J as a supportive and facilitative member of the group. Further positive moments I observed were:

- *the group choosing to set up a self study group to help them reduce anxiety about exams,*
- *deciding to establish a Facebook group to stay in touch and get to know each other better and*
- *the collective positive feedback they were able to give each other on a weekly basis.*

They genuinely appeared to become more understanding of J's difficulties with behaviour and despite some sessions dedicating time to unpick particularly negative incidents involving J's behaviour they continued being dedicated to meeting together. J continued to find it difficult to see himself as part of the group, especially at times when he was given constructive criticism he may not have wanted to hear. However, his interactions with his peers and ability to say sorry when he may have caused them upset increased. The Group Problem Solving sessions certainly seemed to provide an opportunity for him to interact positively with his peers and prioritise the group identity over that of him promoting his own status through negative behaviour. Taking on board the feedback from the tutor, it would now be helpful for the sessions to consider the issues that other members of the group may experience.

Next steps

- Continued Educational Psychologist involvement in monitoring of J.'s progress and other learners with learning difficulties and disabilities students transitioning from New Horizon's to mainstream classes.
- Continuation of the Group Problem Solving sessions with the group, increasing the frequency to twice per half term, with facilitation role gradually being shared with the Learning Support Assistant.
- Use of the approach in a preventative capacity in the transition of most New Horizons students into mainstream classes.
- Ensure that the sessions provide focus on all students equally – perhaps using a rotational model.
- Educational Psychologist to conduct another class observation to identify primary evidence of positive group interaction to feedback to the next session.