

USE OF A GROUP WORK PROGRAMME TO IMPROVE THE EDUCATIONAL ADJUSTMENT  
OF EX-DETAINEES

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of detention without trial has become significant in South African life. Arising out of this is the need for social service professionals to consider the nature of their responses. Young detainees face special difficulties because their identities are not yet clearly formed and because their coping skills may be inadequate. Their education may also be disrupted.

The study endeavoured to obtain information regarding the experiences, needs and self ratings of a group of young ex-detainees as well as their teachers' ratings of them. It also aimed to develop and evaluate an appropriate group work intervention. The sample consisted of twenty-one students. A Behaviour Rating Scale administered to students and teachers and Semi-Structured Interviews with students were used at both the pre- and post-test phases. Students were divided into Experimental and Control groups. The Experimental group received service immediately.

Findings indicate that most students experience financial, emotional, academic and interpersonal difficulties. They have lower self ratings than teacher ratings, particularly in the scholastic/cognitive area indicating poor self concepts. There were no statistically significant findings as a result of group work intervention. However, the students' self reports indicate that their relationships with others and their ability to deal with feelings improved. The potential value of this intervention was therefore suggested.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own, unaided work.  
It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Education  
(School Counselling) at the University of the Witwatersrand,  
Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree  
or examination at any other university.

A M Decaires-Wagner  
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3<sup>rd</sup> May 1989  
Date

DEDICATION

To Nicholas, in the hope that his  
generation will cherish the right  
of all human beings to equality and  
freedom.

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I would like to thank the following people for their help in preparing this research report:

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## CHAPTER 1 - BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Introduction

South Africans have lived under a virtually continuous State of Emergency since June 1985. This period has seen the steady erosion of individual rights and the restriction or banning of a range of political, community and professional organisations. Particularly hard hit have been organisations adhering to the principle of a non-racial, democratic, united South Africa. In the period since June 1985, 30 000 people are estimated to have been detained. Of these some forty per cent are children under the age of eighteen (Schmid, 1988). Clearly this is a figure of concern to professionals offering service to children.

This new and somewhat disquieting phase in our history had its birth in June 1976. It was then that students began organising themselves in opposition to the government's decision to force the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for specific subjects. This issue symbolised for the students the government's lack of accountability to those it professed to serve. The government responded to the increased political activity of students by banning the Congress of South African Students in 1985. At the time of its banning its membership was estimated at three million (Detainees Parents Support Committee, 1987). Community groups and labour movements grew rapidly in the period around the launch of the United Democratic Front in 1983 (Detainees Parents Support Committee, 1987). Parents, teachers and the broader community joined with the students as the demands shifted from the educational arena to the broader political arena. The demand for a unitary, non-racial, equitable educational system mirrored the broader call for a non-racial, united, democratic South Africa.

The price paid by many young people has been very high. Many were unable to complete their education due to the ongoing school boycotts and general disruption of community life. Others lost valuable years of schooling at great personal and family cost. Many left the country to join the fight for change from outside. For those who remained inside the country detention was often the price to be paid.

This study locates itself within the progressive social service movement's need to find ways of helping young people overcome the traumatic events of detention and re-enter political activity, should they wish to. Few services are available within traditional welfare structures to help detainees cope when they are released. Knowledge regarding which helping methods are effective are in the process of development. This study hopes to increase that knowledge base.

#### 1.2 Education in the South African context

South Africa is experiencing considerable race and class conflict. It faces political and economic pressure as a result of sanctions and disinvestment as well as isolation due to the academic, sporting and cultural boycotts (Naidoo, 1988). Despite this it has continued to enforce the cornerstone legislation of apartheid - one of these being a racially segregated educational system.

Education has therefore remained a key area around which both students and the broader community have protested. Initially, in 1976, educational protests were characterised by differing perceptions between students and their parents. Only in isolated cases were parents supportive, e.g. when the Soweto Parents Association was formed in 1976 (Chikane, 1986). By September 1985 that position had changed dramatically. Parents became aware of the need to become active participants in their children's education, and the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee was formed. By December 1985 this grouping was able to arrange a national consultative conference held in Johannesburg. This parent grouping resolved that their children should return to school in 1986 and gave the government three months to respond to their grievances. All of this occurred against the backdrop of a partial State of Emergency and the decision by many young people to boycott examinations in 1985. The National Education Crisis Committee formed in 1986 to draw together parents and students nationwide was subsequently banned. A number of the leaders of this organisation were detained; some remain in detention to date (Chikane, 1986; Christie, 1985).

African education in South Africa developed within a Christian National perspective. One aspect of this is the belief that all people have a

function in life dependent on their racial classification. Education plays a crucial role in preparing people to fulfil these functions (Christie, 1985). Initially this was reflected in the dogmatic view of Verwoerd that 'non-Europeans' should not be educated beyond their station in life. These dogmatic notions of apartheid education have developed in some respect since then partly as a result of political factors, but mainly in response to economic forces. Burman and Reynolds (1986:104) comment that the change has been superficial and that apartheid ideology now persists in 'sanitised' form. This statement is demonstrated most clearly through the following figures. Ormond (1986:85) points out that there are eighteen education departments within South Africa (including the Homelands) and fifteen ministers of education.

Per capita spending on education continues to reveal enormous differences across racial groups. In 1986/87 the figure for Africans attending school in South Africa was R368 while Whites received R2 299. The government has developed a programme aimed at achieving parity in educational spending within the next ten years. Per capita spending for Homelands where figures were available, ranged from R279 to R413 (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1988). The comparable figures given by Ormond (1986) for the years 1983/84 were that Africans received R234 per child per annum while white children received R1 654. White spending has therefore increased by twenty-eight per cent while spending on Africans has increased by thirty-six per cent.

In addition to these very serious economic inequalities in education African children face a wide range of social conditions from birth onwards which may prevent them making full use of even these limited opportunities. These stressors include poverty, poor or non-existent housing, inadequate health care, poor recreational facilities, nutritional deficits, unemployment, the migrant labour system and general family instability (Burman & Reynolds, 1986). Limited work has been done to understand the impact of these overriding political and economic factors on normal human development, particularly in the critical transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood.

### 1.3 Development tasks of adolescence and youth

Young people (those between eighteen and twenty-three years of age) have been conceived of as passing through a unique stage of life only in the

recent past. Prior to this, developmental psychology viewed the movement as being directly from adolescence to adulthood. This position was adopted by Hurlock (1964) until twenty years ago. The primary reason for the inclusion of youth as a stage of life has been the extended period of education which most Americans now engage in. This has resulted in a longer period of being in limbo between adolescence and adulthood.

Erikson classified the adolescence phase as one of 'psychological moratorium' in which the individual is freed of responsibilities to enable him/her to explore a range of alternatives before taking on the more serious commitments of adulthood. For the individual to enter this life stage effectively he/she should have developed a clear sense of identity. This identity integration is dependent not only on the psychological make-up of the particular individual but also on the society he/she lives in, particularly its 'ethical soundness, credibility and rational consistency' (Conger, 1984:17).

In young adulthood or youth, as this phase is now more commonly called, the primary task turns from the personal preoccupation of adolescence to greater interest in the outside world. The youth begins to explore a range of ideologies and life options. This change is the result of changing cognitive processes identified by Piaget.

The adolescent and youth becomes more able to think about possibilities, hypotheses, thoughts and the future. This growing ability to make abstractions enables the development of political thought. Research indicates that there is an increased ability to recognise the needs of the wider society. Political involvement increases, particularly where the parents are politically active.

The most influential factors affecting political thinking are the attitudes of parents and the mass media (Biehler, 1985; Cole, 1959). The peer group influences political activism in that it determines whether such activity is socially acceptable (Hurlock, 1973).

#### 1.4 Detention

As noted above, young people form forty per cent of the total detainee population in 1985-1988. This figure does not include young adults but

only those under the age of 18 years. The political activity of young people in South Africa has thus resulted in severe extra-legal reaction by the state, amounting to repression. The detention of a young person often follows a period of uncertainty as the individual may have been in hiding or fearful of detention. It may have been impossible to work or attend school for the same reason. Family life is often disrupted as a result of the uncertainty about the whereabouts or safety of a family member. Roles traditionally played by family members may become blurred as other people take on roles usually filled by those in hiding. Separation of family members may occur, and all this within the context of communities which are usually unsettled due to police and army activity as well as a myriad of legislation affecting everyday life (Concerned Social Workers, 1987; OASSSA, 1988; Schmid, 1988; Straker, 1987).

When the detention occurs, however, the problems are brought into even sharper focus because of the knowledge that the length of the detention is arbitrarily determined by those in authority. For the detainee him/herself the detention experience may well be just the beginning of his/her difficulties. Katz (1982) has identified three models which assist in developing an understanding of the detention experience. These are sensory deprivation; debility, dependence and dread syndrome, and the post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sensory deprivation is a somewhat inadequate term and will be clarified through the use of the term Restricted Environmental Stimulation (REST). This term encompasses both reduced stimulation, perceptual deprivation over-stimulation and monotonous stimulation (Foster, Davis & Sandler, 1985: 57). REST produces clear cognitive changes especially in the early days of detention. The crucial period appears to be the first two days. The highest losses are in the areas of abstract reasoning, visualisation, verbal fluency and numerical reasoning. Tasks involving rote learning, recall and verbal reasoning are not as negatively affected. The greatest impairment is therefore in complex tasks which have little organisation (Foster et al, 1985:60). REST results in increased susceptibility to influence and Foster argues therefore that statements made during detention must be viewed with the utmost caution by the courts. Motor co-ordination is affected by REST especially with regard to dexterity and hand-eye

co-ordination. There are measurable changes in the functioning of the Central Nervous System, e.g. an increase in REM sleep.

Finally motivational changes are evident with an increase in stimulus-seeking behaviour. The individual seeks to create a satisfactory level of arousal and stimulation.

In research findings regarding REST, information is the stimulus most regularly sought (Foster et al, 1985). Psycho-analysis explains REST effects in terms of changes in the relationship between id and ego functioning. Neuro-physiological explanations focus on the organism's basic drive to maintain an optimal level of stimulation. Cognitive theories postulate that REST disrupts cognitive schemata monitoring. Thus far these divergent theories have not been drawn together into a cohesive whole.

The second explanatory model postulated by Katz (1982) is that of Debility, Dependence and Dread (DDD). A number of techniques are used to obtain information from the detained individual. Debility is achieved through reducing food intake drastically. This technique is particularly effective with young people who are growing and require a high kilojoule diet. A second facet of DDD is the constant humiliations and physical abuse which contribute to this sense of debility. Dependence is particularly easily achieved when detainees are held in solitary confinement since the detainee then becomes completely reliant on his/her captors. A sense of dread is induced through the use of threats, the power the police have to detain people indefinitely and to cause physical and psychological harm. As a result of DDD new learning takes place. Relief from DDD is achieved through conformity with the demands of the captors and psychological helplessness ensues (Foster et al, 1985; Friedman, 1987; Katz, 1982).

The third explanatory model put forward by Katz (1982) has been widely accepted by helping professionals and is explored here in some detail. The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may occur when individuals are subjected to traumatic events outside the range of normal human experience. The essential features of PTSD are re-experiencing the traumatic event both while awake and sleeping and through association with environmental stimuli. Secondly, individuals display numbing of responsiveness and a

lack of interest in activities. They may experience feelings of detachment and constricted affect. The individual may be hyper-alert and display a startle response.

Sleep disturbances and insomnia are common, as is guilt about survival or the behaviour required for survival. Memory and concentration impairments may be present along with a pervasive anxiety and a deep depression. The former detainee may be extremely irritable and avoid activities which arouse recollections of the traumatic event. Symptoms would tend to be intensified when the person is exposed to events which symbolise or resemble the traumatic event (Andreasen, 1980; Foster et al, 1985; Friedman, 1987; Manson, 1986; Schmid, 1988; Straker, 1987; Tyson, 1983).

Foster et al (1985) have summarised the stresses detainees face as falling within the following categories: The first is physical stressors such as the deprivation or excess of life supports, e.g. food, water, light, air and sleep. Severe pain through and following torture may also be present as a physical stressor. Psychological stressors include sensory overload, deprivation or monotony of stimuli, emotional arousal through terror, fear, anxiety and the use of threats. Learning techniques which result in behaviour control may be used as well as motivational control which results in helplessness and dependence. Cognitive and communication manipulation is another psychological stressor. The third category of stressor is the social-psychological. This includes threats to the detainee's beliefs, values and world view, abuse of the captor-captive relationship and isolation from significant others. The detainee may be held in solitary confinement. Compliance with captor's wishes may be gained through threats made against significant others. Dependency is generated in this manner. The final category is the 'institutionalised' stressor which includes physical detention and the overriding control exerted by those in authority through their manipulation of where and under what conditions the detainee is held.

Stress is defined as 'affective, behavioural and physiological responses to aversive stimuli' (Glass, 1972). The degree of stress suffered is mediated by cognitive factors and is substantially influenced by the

individual's psychological make-up and unique perception of the stressful event. Factors which enhance adequate coping with the stressor are a hardy personality with intellectual resources and mature strengths and a sense of control over the stress situation. Individuals with strong social support networks and a clear political commitment cope better with the experience of detention.

Knowledge and preparedness for the stress event further enhance coping capacities. The issue of control appears to be crucial whether this control is real or perceived. This is linked to the individual's belief in his/her ability to cope with the situation (Caplan, 1981; Foster et al, 1985; Glass, 1972; Tyson, 1983).

The stress responses described above fail to take into account the nature of stress in the South African situation. Chikane has said that African youth are the victims of state abuse of children. 'To be born into an apartheid society is to be born into a battleground. It is a battle for one's survival, for one's human dignity' (1986:6). The stressors faced by most young people are extreme enough to be considered outside the range of normal experience, e.g. witnessing violence on a regular basis, living under virtual military siege in army occupied townships and facing constant debilitating legislation which renders a wide variety of normal acts illegal, e.g. living and working where one chooses. For those who are detained their levels of stress are no doubt already heightened because of the harassment they face due to their political activities. It is within this context that Straker (1987) has questioned whether PTSD is an adequate term to describe what is occurring with ex-detainees in South Africa.

#### 1.5 Therapeutic responses to detainees

Straker (1987) points out that much of the work done with former political detainees and torture victims overseas has occurred in settings where helping professionals were able to guarantee reasonable safety to victims. Professionals in South Africa are not able to do so and in addition former detainees return to township conditions which are extremely stressful.

A more adequate description of the emotional disorder faced by ex-detainees is that of Continuous Traumatic Stress Disorder (CTSD). Friedman (1987)



adds that fears in reaction to PTSD are normally unrealistic in relation to future events. The fears experienced by former detainees in South Africa are not paranoid and are rooted in a reality perspective. Possible re-detention, harassment by the authorities and township stressors are a real part of their daily reality.

Much of the intervention and assistance provided to ex-detainees by social service workers have been individually based. Neither short-term nor long-term counselling has proved feasible because of the structural factors present, e.g. financial difficulties, lack of trust in therapy and counsellors, fear of re-detention and long travelling distances (Friedman, 1987).

Work done in Scandinavia indicates that psychological assistance works most effectively when located within a holistic range of services. The indications are that ex-detainees suffer a wide range of medical difficulties, tremors and shaking, constipation, ulcers (Daly, 1980; Friedman, 1987; Kelly, 1983; Somnier & Genefke, 1986).

Until medical difficulties are treated psychological intervention is inappropriate. The constant pain faced by ex-detainees may be a persistent reminder of the detention experience. There is agreement that medical care takes priority. Daly (1980) points out that this intervention must be skilled as symptoms tended to grow more severe and that recovery is inhibited by structural factors such as unemployment and family relationship difficulties. Doctors tended to underestimate the severity of the symptoms and to assess prognosis as favourable even in situations of extreme stress.

Ideally services should encompass medical, nursing, physiotherapy, psychology, social work, dentistry and neurology. Kelly (1983) believes that physiotherapy is especially valuable in massaging stiff backs, treating joint pains and in repairing damaged motor functions. Integrated services appear to offer former detainees the best prognosis for full recovery. Unfortunately financial, logistical and political limitations have prevented the development of such facilities in South Africa.

Specifically with regard to counselling, a single therapeutic interview has proved the most feasible structure to utilise in counselling ex-detainees. For the reasons listed above many ex-detainees are unable to return for further sessions (Friedman, 1987; Straker, 1987).

The opening phase requires the establishment of trust by the ex-detainee in the counsellor. This is facilitated by the counsellor being introduced by an acknowledged community leader. The ex-detainee is told that the counsellor has worked with others with similar difficulties and a suggestion is made that they both look at the issues. Whenever possible the counsellor should work with those from the legal or medical fields as this gives credibility and locates the counsellor within a helping context. The second part of the opening phase concentrates on establishing ground themes. This allows the person to share his/her experience in general while respecting his/her natural defences and allowing time for trust to develop. This phase is confirmed by Manson (1986) who regards trust building as the most important beginning issue.

The second stage deals more specifically with the trauma while facilitating catharsis as the victim is encouraged to share his/her own specific experience. Cognitive information is provided to assist the person to place his/her experience within a more realistic context. The therapist helps to identify the most traumatic events and the feelings attached to these. The therapist is not a blank screen but offers active comfort and support. The therapist should ideally have come to terms with his/her feelings about detention and be knowledgeable about detention conditions so that he/she is not shocked or overwhelmed by the patient's revelations. He/she requires therapeutic detachment. Facilitation of mastery is encouraged through helping the victim recognise the clear link between the cruelty he/she was exposed to and the symptoms he/she is experiencing. Specific factors which might affect individual mastery of the situation must be assessed and dealt with. Politicised individuals tend to be more able to make meaning of their detention experience than those who are not activists. Guilt must be explored and clarified and finally the person helped to recognise the consequences the detention has had for him/her and recapitulation of the major issue occurs.

Group work with repression victims is relatively undeveloped compared to individual counselling as described above. Straker (1987) states that the method described above can be used both with individuals and in groups. Sacco (1986) stressed the importance of flexibility with regard to group membership, planning and length of sessions in view of the chaotic life experiences group members may have had to endure. The young people involved will only participate in the group once the leader's political bona fides are evident. Sacco points out that therapists must reconsider their traditional understanding of human development. The young people they work with may have highly developed political skills but lack relationship skills or emotional strength. Straker (1986) has commented on the value of group discussion and peer support in evaluating whether anxiety is realistic or exaggerated.

A crucial issue which helping professionals in South Africa are faced with is the intense anger and desire for revenge expressed by some ex-detainees. This is in contrast to research findings from other countries (Somnier & Genefke, 1986; Straker, 1987). The possibility of a brutalised generation evokes much controversy amongst professionals as they struggle to understand the effects of ongoing violence on young people.

#### 1.6 Conclusion

South Africans live in an extremely stressful situation as a result of the political and economic forces operating at present. The on-going State of Emergency has resulted in the detention of thousands of young people. This detention experience and its consequences may be viewed within the context of the young person's life stage, and through syndromes such as Restricted Environmental Stimulation, Debility, Dependence and Dread, the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Continuous Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Social service professionals have been called upon to develop skills to understand the impact of detention and to assist people to deal with the problems arising as a result of detention. The single therapeutic interview has been widely accepted by therapists as providing the best service within the many limitations which exist. Group work is a further treatment possibility which has not been fully explored to date.

## CHAPTER 2 - THE STUDY

### 2.1 Rationale for the study

Detention and its consequences are of great concern to social service professionals. In South Africa the helping response has focused to a large degree on individual counselling although some group work has been undertaken and there is recognition that this method has value for ex-detainees. Unfortunately because the nature of the work is largely within a single session there has been little opportunity to assess the value of an on-going group.

Young people are the most likely to be detained at a life-stage where crucial tasks are being negotiated, e.g. the development of a clear identity. They are also involved in preparing for the future either through formal education or through the work situation. Many young ex-detainees are not able to return to full-time education once they are released. They are often isolated from their peer group as a result of this. However, for those who do return to full-time education this setting was an ideal one from which to provide service to ex-detainees. It allowed for the students to be helped regularly in a consistent group over a period of time. The intervention and findings would also then be available to the teachers who work with them.

All of the above factors led towards a decision that group work intervention would best be assessed using this age group. It was hoped that the study would help not only professionals but others such as teachers working closely with youth who have been detained.

### 2.2 Aims

The aims of the study were as follows:

The overall aim was to develop and implement a group work intervention to tap perceptions of adjustment and to assist ex-detainees to improve their educational adjustment. Within this context the following subsidiary aims were formulated. It was aimed to:

- (1) obtain a basic understanding of the impact of detention on the development of adolescents and youth;

- (2) compare the teacher's evaluations of students' educational and social functioning prior to and subsequent to the group work intervention;
- (3) compare the students' self-evaluation of educational and social functioning prior to and subsequent to the group work intervention;
- (4) compare students' perceptions of their educational and social functioning with the teacher's perceptions of their educational and social function prior to the group work intervention;
- (5) compare students' perceptions of their educational and social functioning with the teacher's perceptions of their educational and social functioning subsequent to the group work intervention;
- (6) compare non-detained with ex-detained students' perceptions of their educational and social functioning both before and after the group work intervention.

### 2.3 Method

#### 2.3.1 Subjects

The twenty-one subjects are African youths aged between eighteen and twenty-four years. All but one were male. The subjects attend the Inter-Church Tuition Project of the Witwatersrand Council of Churches. This project provides services to pre-matriculation and matriculation students over the age of eighteen years. Students attending the pre-matriculation class have experienced some educational difficulty or other disruption which necessitates them completing matriculation over a two-year period. Twenty-one students participated in the data-gathering phases of the research. Of this number, sixteen had been detained for varying periods. The other five had never been detained; most had experienced significant stress due to other difficulties. A number of the students had experienced disrupted education for lengthy periods.

#### 2.3.2 Procedure

The research project consists of three phases, viz. the pre-testing, the intervention and the post-testing. Within the pre-testing, data gathering consisted of semi-structured interviews with the students, a Behaviour Rating Scale (BRS) administered to each student and completed in respect

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