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## **Schools as Agents of Community Recovery in Northern Ireland** **Engaging with statutory and community systems by working through denial**

*Real names have been changed and only selected details have been included because of the sensitivity of the material considered.*

This is a story of a tiny rural school in a remote part of Northern Ireland whose cries for help were eventually heard and created opportunities for engaging positively with Education, Church and community systems (diag 1) to bring help through schools to children affected by trauma.

Their cries for help reached me during my contract with an Education Authority in the aftermath of the Omagh bomb in 1998. The bomb, planted in the main shopping street of this market town in west Northern Ireland on a busy Saturday afternoon, resulted in 31 deaths (including unborn twins) and over 350 injuries with many traumatic amputations. This made it the worst single atrocity in the 30 years of on-going civil unrest in Northern Ireland, known as the 'Troubles', the latest phase of centuries of conflict in Ireland whose roots and history are complex and entangled with European and British economic, religious, civil rights and power struggles.

This is a story of the courage and persistence of a small number of community leaders and local professionals, facilitated by an external consultancy, to ensure that children distressed by this and other traumatic incidents received informed, skilled help from all the adults in their lives, who also needed help for their distress. Making this happen required a hard struggle with denial, inefficiency, ignorance, sabotage, power struggles and resistance at personal, societal and institutional levels. It involved some of the key themes of this conference about how to reach vulnerable groups such as women, children and isolated communities through building resilience and giving attention to family and community contexts rather than just focussing on individual pathology and treatment. The hope of the story is that by working with resistance, opportunities were created for engaging with systems. By engaging with systems, doors for learning and change were opened for schools to become agents of healing in the wider Province.

The story began with one angry woman. She had just become Acting Principal of a Primary School of just 70 children in an isolated border community of scattered farms and houses, 20 miles south of Omagh. The Principal had just begun Maternity Leave. She was angry because her school had been left off the lists for receiving information packs and invitations to support meetings set up for schools affected by the bomb. The various bodies managing the school had also responded in what she experienced as an unhelpful manner because they had little knowledge about how best to respond. She had felt oppressed by heavy-handed male managers and pathologised because she was a woman, audibly expressing her views. This triggered memories in me of my first experiences after a disaster (Capewell, 1993) and I had to be careful of transference issues. She had felt the needs of herself, staff and pupils had been

denied in terms of their impact, interpretation and implication (see Cohen, 2001). The staff team of 8 full-time and 5 part-time teaching and support staff had just gone through a period of upheaval and was struggling to cope. In fact, no one had had the capacity to hear their distress and elicit the full facts and the significance of the impact of the bomb. This was therefore our first task in order to make a case for gaining authority and funds to work with the school.

The scale of our work with the whole area (including 80 schools) after the bomb was immense so keeping contact with this woman was achieved by phone and brief meetings. The work was undertaken by myself and one colleague. As the degree of the impact on the school emerged our determination to get help to the school was fuelled. At first sight, three pupils (aged 3, 5 and 6 years) had lost their mother, 7 months pregnant with twins, baby sister and grandmother in the explosion. But the mother had also been a volunteer helper at the school, an important member of a women's group at the school and a campaigner for a school nursery. The staff had thus lost a colleague and a personal and family friend. The ripples of loss spread through the school as many pupils were first cousins, distant relatives or friends of the victims and bereaved. Identification stress was present for the teacher on Maternity leave, a friend of the dead mother, whose baby was due when the twins should have been born. The wider impact of the bomb did not fully emerge until our first official meeting with all the staff 4 months after the bomb. A hierarchy of suffering emerges after disaster with people who judge themselves to be less severely affected unwilling to mention their own involvement. Staff had no idea that many of them were 'near misses' and that the teenage daughter of one teacher had been injured. The timing of the bomb after the signing of the April 1998 Peace agreement also caused a tremendous loss of hope for the future amongst the general community.

It is never enough to assess the impact of an incident in isolation of past, current and, as they emerge, future stresses. They then have to be assessed in relation to individuals, the school and community. Previous traumas affect perceptions and coping capacities in both those affected and those available for support. Our assessment produced a catalogue of events that made people more vulnerable to stress and placed this incident in a context of many other horrific incidents which had affected the area in the previous 30 years:

**1. Past trauma:**

- 'Troubles' related events: fatal booby-trap bombs and shootings, in some cases directly involving school staff and Governors.
- Recent local traumatic deaths including youth suicides and accidental deaths of children.

**2. Current traumas:**

- the events leading up to and the death 5 weeks after the bomb of one of 2 pupils in the same class who had leukaemia. The dead pupil's father was also a school Governor involved in decision making about the response to the bomb. This stress caused even more direct distress to the whole school than the bomb.
- the stress of the job itself, staff changes and managing family life where the families tended to be large and had also been affected by these incidents
- On-going tensions of Civil unrest and an uneasy Peace (see diag 2)

### **3. Future traumas which emerged:**

- Over the next 2 years, progress was complicated by 2 deaths of young people in road accidents. In each case, the victim was related to or a family friend of members of staff.
- The staff also had immense fears about their first major school inspection which could happen at any time in the year after the bomb. This would involve a great increase in work at a time when everyone was exhausted and vulnerable.

Reporting what was involved in negotiating help for this school can never communicate adequately the nature of living this process. The longer it took, the more stresses and repercussions accumulated. Even with their very visible need for help, it took 4 months to gain the small amount of funding needed to enable us to work for 1 day with managing bodies and 2 days with staff. It then took another 5 months to obtain permission for the follow-up programme. This was in a context where the Secretary of State for Education, Dr Mo Mowlam, had promised that money should be no barrier to such work.

However, though the process was hard, the fact that it happened at all was of major significance. In many other schools the need for support was prematurely ended within weeks of the bomb explosion and in some it never really began. Such experiences have been reported in many other disasters, such as the Oklahoma bomb where Principals denied help to pupils because they 'used their own coping styles as a yardstick for what was needed' (Zinner and Williams, 1999). In the political, sectarian context of Northern Ireland, denial had also been a dominant and sometimes necessary coping strategy valued in society during the 'Troubles'. Schools had concurred with this view (Smyth 1998). Full and open Psycho-social responses to incidents by Statutory agencies had never before been possible. In the whole history of the 'Troubles' the open response to the Omagh bomb was unique because the incident was targeted at all sides of the community and the recent Peace agreement made it possible.

In the case of this story, enough factors were present to counter denial. Denial was still a potent force and it took many forms, the collective form being most damaging (diag 3). Education Authorities had denied the need to prepare and formulate post-incident strategies. This meant, for example, a lack of clear boundaries about roles and responsibilities between Managing bodies. This small school had in fact 3 different Managing Bodies, representing Church, State and local community. One of our most important actions was to bring these bodies together and deal with the personal stress of officials in order to unite them to agree on a way forward. Conflicts within and between these agencies also had to be mediated. The most damaging conflicts were those where people translated their personal issues into action that sabotaged progress, passively by failing to attend meetings or fulfil obligations and actively through destructive behaviour. In one case, active support for the work was replaced by denial of its need. When this could not be sustained, the integrity of different professionals involved was attacked. Finally ourselves, as external consultants, became the target.

Though the presence of external consultants is often viewed negatively, the fact that we were present was a major catalytic force in facilitating and linking local people to overcome the strong forces of denial (Diag 4). Our own commitment to this work in general and the school in particular fuelled our resolve. We entered the community as human beings first, second as people with expertise to offer but not impose. We could not have been successful without the 'internal' allies we had from the outset. More were recruited in the process from all agencies involved. Some of these people moved quickly from a position where, through lack of

experience, they had been part of the original problem to become the most active promoters of the work, once their awareness had been raised. The recently appointed Chairman of the School Governors, a priest, quickly learned and took on his power to move astutely through the bureaucratic minefield. He kept faith in our work when it was being undermined and when the process of recovery itself threw up the occasional negative projection from someone.

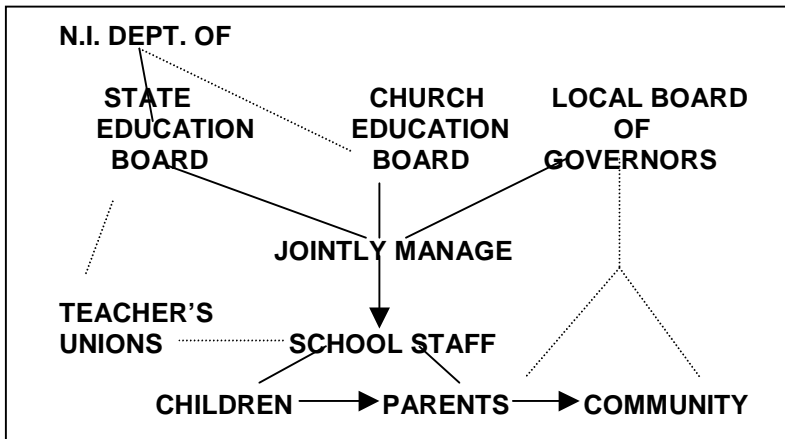
The Board of Governors was instrumental in taking learning out to the parents and wider community. The Chairman even integrated our multi-dimensional coping model into his Sunday sermon. School staff also became 'agents of learning' in the community and so too did some of the school children. They responded well to the different ideas and class methods we passed on to their teachers. At an organisational level, 2 middle Managers from different bodies overcame different forms of resistance to enable review and learning sessions to be funded. In this way, learning and an awareness of needs and possibilities for recovery work in schools was passed on to higher levels in the Education system. The Teachers' Unions also became aware of our work in this and another school. As a result, we assisted them in producing a booklet of Crisis management guidelines which have been distributed to schools throughout the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. The spin-offs from this are now being seen in the increase in Crisis Management pre-planning and staff training in schools and Education Authorities.

Dara, the Acting Principal, the angry woman who could not hide her rage at the lack of useful support for her distressed pupils, brought meaning to the lines: 'When a woman tells her truth, the world splits asunder'. Community, church and statutory systems were challenged. The status quo cracked sufficiently for pathways of opportunity to be opened up for engagement so that inroads of learning and change could be made. She showed how one person in an isolated school could indeed make a difference.

**DIAGRAMS**

**Diag 1 STATUTORY and COMMUNITY SYSTEMS:**

Links made in gaining help for the school



Diag 2 TRAUMA WITHIN CIVIL UNREST

- TRAUMA WITHIN CIVIL UNREST:**
- IS COLLECTIVE
  - IS PUBLIC
  - CREATES STEREOTYPES
  - IS INDIVIDUAL & COMMUNAL
  - ENDS TRUST: who is the enemy?
  - MEANS POLITICS INVADES ALL
  - DESTROYS SOCIAL SUPPORT
  - IMPACTS SOCIO-ECO FABRIC

Diag 3 IMPACT OF DENIAL

1. INDIVIDUAL for PRIVATE ENDS – a matter of personal choice
  2. COLLECTIVE for POLITICAL ENDS
- LEADS TO:
- DENIAL of:
- IMPACT
  - INTERPRETATION
  - IMPLICATION
  - MESSENGERS
- RESULTS in:
- CODE of SILENCE
  - FEAR
  - APATHY
  - COMPLEX TRAUMA
  - REPERCUSSIONS
  - CUMULATIVE VIOLENCE
- (after Cohen 2001)

Diag 4 OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

- WHAT HELPED?**
- MULTI-LEVEL SYSTEMIC APPROACH
  - THOROUGH ASSESSMENT
  - PARTNERSHIP
  - ACTION LEARNING & RESEARCH
  - COURAGEOUS COMMUNITY LEADERS
  - INFORMED INTERNAL PROFESSIONALS
  - EXTERNAL CIM EXPERTISE
  - SUSTAINED WILL TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

**References**

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