

The impact of an improvised social work method in a school: aspirations, encouragement, realism and openness

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The impact of an improvised social work method in a school:

Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness

Abstract

A high school in the English West Midlands reduces annual school exclusions from 251 to 6 in three years. A social worker is employed by the school to join the student support services. A new method of brief intervention is introduced by the social worker based on 'aspirations, encouragement, realism and openness' (AERO), summarised by one teacher as helping a conversation develop in which the young people can discuss problems that they would otherwise find difficult. All of this is established with no special pilot project status or resources.

This article considers the relationship between these factors and evaluates the *impact* of the AERO method through interviews with key participants - 12 students currently in school and a parent, all of whom had direct experience of the method; and six professionals who experienced the impact of the model. The findings suggest that the philosophy of social inclusion introduced by a new head teacher is sustained by a systematic approach to providing social and personal support to students, and by the use of an effective and efficient practice method. The article discusses the possibilities of transferring the lessons from this study and also the possible limitations of the social work method and the study itself.

Key words

social inclusion; school social work; practice method; empowerment; cognitive therapy; school exclusion

Background

Wellworth School¹ is a comprehensive high school in a semi-rural area of the West Midlands. It has a total of 802 students² ranging from Years 9-13 (ages 13-18). The school first employed a school social worker in 2007, a year after the appointment of a new head teacher.

It is unusual enough for a UK school to employ a qualified social worker as part of its student support service, but the dramatic reductions in school exclusions in Wellworth over the last three years (from 251 in 2006 to 71 in 2007 to 6 in 2008) indicate an extraordinary phenomenon and one deserving of study (see Tables 1 and 2). Clearly, the head teacher's authority and philosophy are the principal movers in reducing exclusion events, but what helps to support and sustain this policy? As well as the appointment of a new head teacher, the introduction of the school social work service suggested another key factor, as well as the practice method designed and developed by the social worker, now used extensively with the school's students. The study wished to discover how this method was experienced by the students, whether it was contributing to the school's impressive statistics, and its potential for transfer to other schools and settings.

The School had an Ofsted³ visit whilst the research interviews were being conducted. The Ofsted report described both the pastoral care and the Family and Student Services provision as outstanding. Given the established quality of the service, this study is more to find out what is making it outstanding.

¹ The school has been anonymised.

² The term 'student' is used in this article to denote students at the school; when reference is made to the student social worker this will be clear.

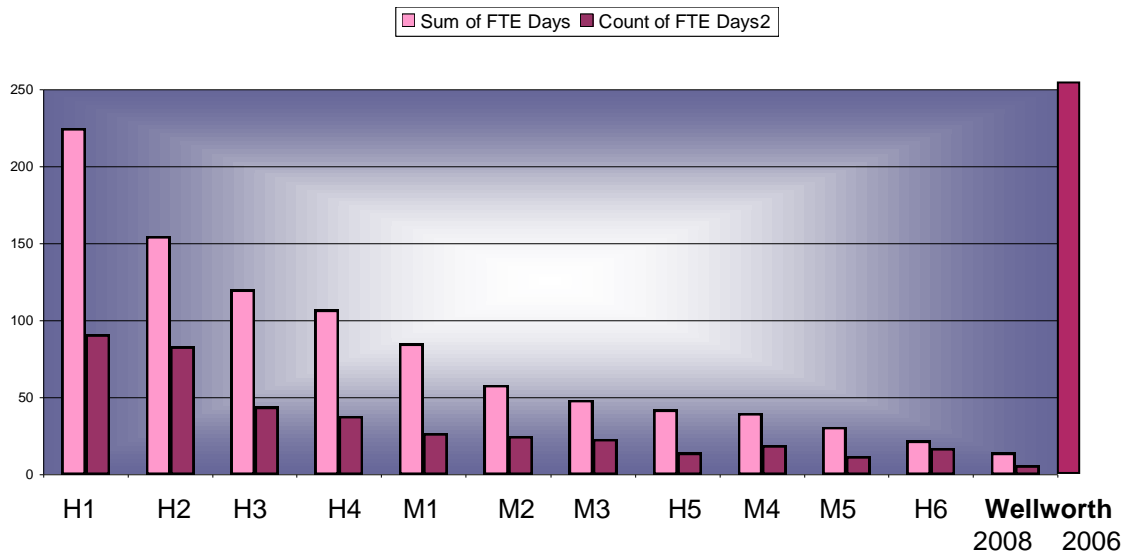
³ Ofsted is the regulatory body for schools in England.

Table 1 Southshire schools:

Numbers of days excluded (sum) and number of exclusions (count)

The sum of days is the total number of days that students were excluded for. The count of full-time equivalent (FTE) days refers to the number of exclusions issued. For example, if there were 3 exclusions in a term and the first was for 1 day, the second for 3 and the third for 5 then the sum equals 9 and the count equals 3.

H=High School; M=Middle School. Wellworth is a High School

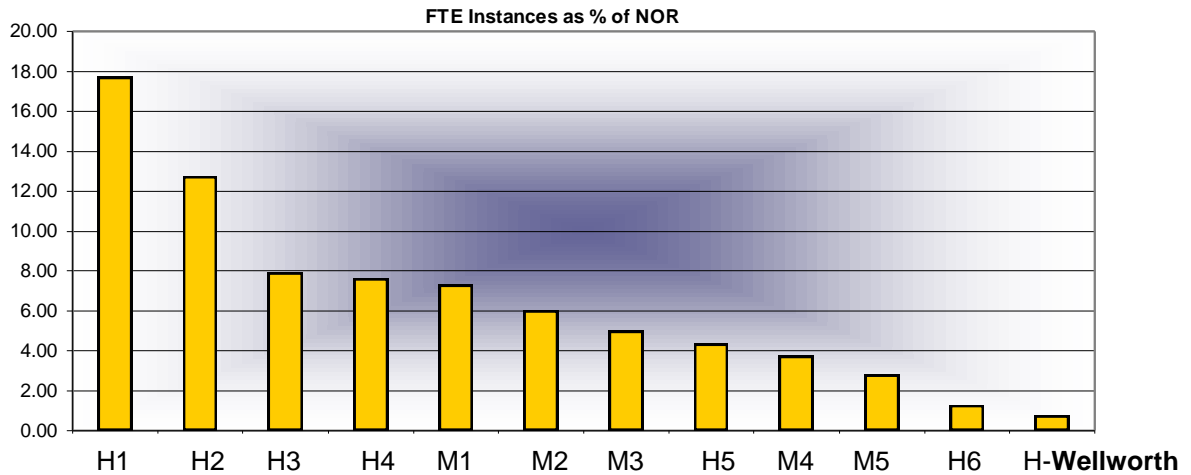


The 2006 figure for Wellworth's count of FTE days is shown alongside its 2008 count. The *sum* of days for Wellworth in 2006 (represented by the light columns) would take us well off the chart. School H6 also does well, having a similar philosophy in terms of finding practical ways of supporting young people.

Table 2 Southshire schools:

Exclusion rates of students as a percentage of all students in the school

NOR is the numbers of students on the school roll, i.e. the total number of students.



Literature review

An electronic search using search terms 'school social work' produced 576 references (SCIE on-line database). Refining the results with 'practice' produced just 9. Expanding with 'guidance', 'good practice' and 'research' resulted in 59 references. An analysis of these revealed 71% (42) from the United States, reflecting a greater strength of school social work there. Just 19% (11) were UK-based. The remaining 10% (6) were from individual countries. Of the 9 results from the 'practice' refinement, 5 were American and 4 British.

In the UK there is some distinction between 'school social worker' and 'education social worker', with the latter not necessarily qualified or based within a school (Reid *et al*, 2008); there is evidence of wide differences between education social work services (Reid, 2005). Cameron's (2006) review of the literature around school discipline found evidence that control methods (deterrence and punishment) are associated with increased disorder in schools and that school social workers can help schools adopt effective non-punitive disciplinary approaches such as the one in this current study. A three-year experimental programme of school social work introduced into a

primary school and a linked secondary school similarly suggested that school social work can have beneficial results, helping to prevent children from coming into care and improving teacher morale (Pritchard and Williams, 2001).

The role of the school social worker is not a given - is it primarily about getting truants into school or preventing students from dropping out (Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008)? The two are not incompatible, but the purely preventative role of the school social worker in the current study seems to be unusual (see the FAST model - Families and Schools Together - for another example of a solely preventative service (www.familiesandschools.org/international-good.php; Gulland, 2008). Will the increasing requirement by states in the US to define the knowledge and skills necessary for school social work (Constable and Alvarez, 2006) mean a loss of preventative functions?

The AERO model, developed and used by the school social worker at the centre of this study, is detailed later. It is part of the family of problem-solving methods (Greene and Grant, 2003; Marsh and Doel, 2006) and cognitive approaches which have been found to be effective compared with nonspecific counselling approaches alone (Whitfield, 1999). This current study is perhaps significant because there are not many accounts of the specific methods of social work practice used in schools (Bailey-Dempsey and Reid, 1996; Early and Vonk, 2001; Openshaw, 2008).

THE STUDY

The study was invited by Wellworth School in the English West Midlands and external funding secured to complete an evaluation. The fieldwork consisted of three days of interviews with 12 students, six staff and a parent, with permissions from all students interviewed and their parents. It became clear in the initial contacts that the method of intervention created by the school social worker was central to the service, so it was decided that this would be the main focus of the interviews with students and the parent.

Sampling

The school social worker provided a full list of the 53 students currently in school who had experienced AERO (see Table 3). Approximately 100 other students have experienced the method but they have graduated. The data was collected by gender, school year and the number of contacts. The researcher had no personal knowledge of any of the students or the circumstances that brought them to the school social work service, so the sampling was anonymous; a stratified sample represented roughly the ratios of gender, school year and number of sessions. Two female students declined to participate, slightly skewing the ratios, and the researcher deliberately included a higher proportion of students who had been seen by the social work student to discover how the method travelled when not used by its designer (initially 3/6, though one declined).

Table 3

Students receiving school social work service and 'AERO' intervention

	Year*					sessions			totals	sample
	9	10	11	12	13	single	2-4	5+		
females	2	10	13	2	1	10	17	1	28	**5
males	7	6	11	1	0	7	13	5	25	7
<i>totals</i>	9	16	24	3	1	17	30	6	53	
sample	2	4	5	1	0	4	4	4		12

* Indicates the students' current school year (some had contact with the school social worker one or two years previously). Yr 9 is approx 13-14 years of age.

** The original female sample included 7 students but two declined.

The sample of 12 respondents also happened to cover a wide range in terms of the length of time since the student had had contact with the social worker. For three students this was two school years ago, for two students contact was current, and the remaining seven were within the last year. Four of the

12 reported a break or gap between the first contact(s) and subsequent ones, when they renewed contact.

Others respondents

To ensure a rounded evaluation, some other stakeholders with direct or indirect experience of the impact of the AERO model were included. One parent with direct experience of the model volunteered to be interviewed, as did a class assistant who had recently participated in a training session. The school head, deputy head and assistant head were interviewed for their opinions as indirect observers of the impact of the model. Finally, the school social worker and the student social worker currently under her supervision, were interviewed. All seven interviews were conducted individually using a semi-structured schedule which encompassed the broader context of school social work and the student support service.

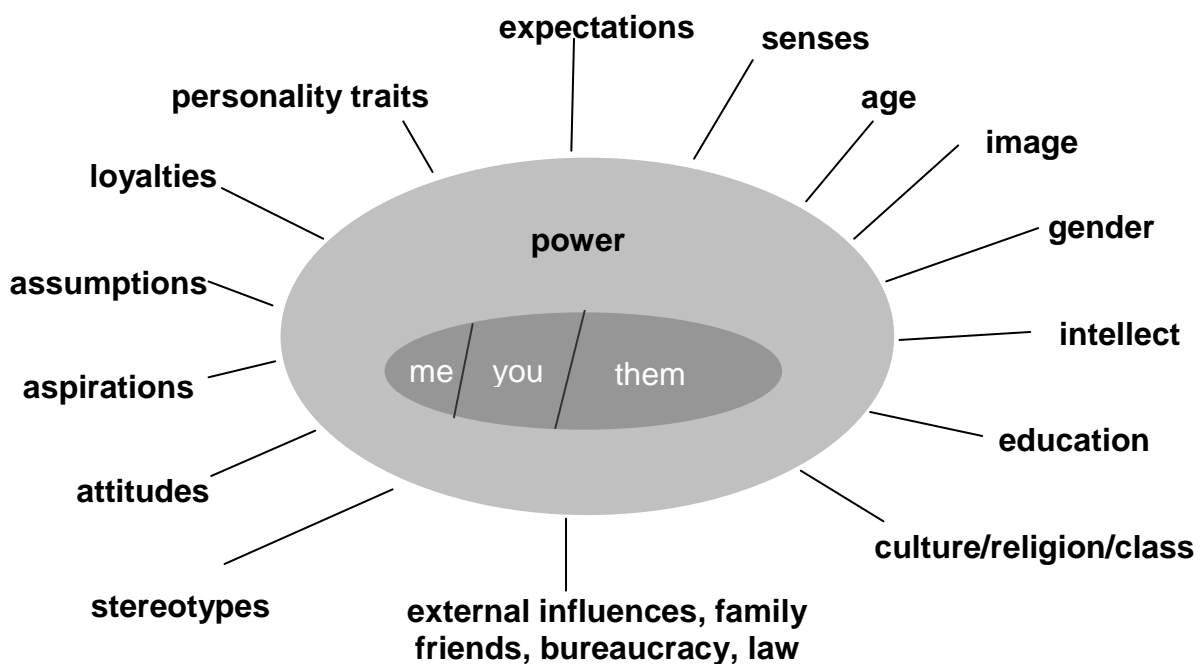
The AERO model (Aspirations, Encouragement, Realism and Openness)

The method designed by the school social work stems from her own experiences of school phobia and a strong desire to help people who can often feel like 'misfits' develop their strengths and plan their futures. An accompanying guide (Bramble, 2008b) introduces the model and illustrates its use with numerous case examples. It is essentially a problem-solving approach and can be used as a 'one-off' or over a series of sessions. At the heart of the method are two tools and it is these tools that the students in the study most remembered. The first was often referred to just to as 'The Words' (Table 4) and the other as 'The Scale' (Table 5).

There is no systematic order for the use of these tools; they appear to be introduced into the problem-solving session at times when the worker feels they are likely to be most effective. However, it seems that it is the use of these two tools and the thoughts, reflections and actions that they trigger, that is the core of the working model. The student is asked to choose one of the Words and to discuss what it means to them; the social worker helps them to elaborate and contextualise; subsequently, other words are chosen by the

student and the it is the student who decides when to stop. The worker and the student social worker (who learned the method) find that the indirectness of the words - and perhaps the fact that it is the student who makes the choice of words - helps liberate the student to speak about issues that might otherwise not emerge, or take much longer.

Table 4: The Words



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The Scale is a device that seems to help the student to move to reflection - about themselves in relation to other people - and to move to action, more precisely how they would like to see themselves developing. Although the phrasing in the Scale is 'rough and ready', even brutally direct in some of its language, the young people can relate to it and it triggers an understanding of how they can sometimes be 'different people' in different situations, but also where on the Scale they would *like* to be. This, in turn, triggers discussion of strategies and plans for moving up or down the Scale. The Words and the Scale are woven into the fabric of the session with the social worker, but it is

clear from the young people's recollections that they are central - and memorable - tools

Table 5: The Scale

		Description	Location or Situation	Action to take or Acceptance
Self Absorbed	1	Hermit. Happy with own company		
	2	Self-harm. Possibly suicidal tendencies		
Sensitive to others	3	Shy introverted		
	4	Slightly introverted.		
	5	Balanced. Could be indecisive.		
	6	Outgoing.		
	7	Bubbly outgoing		
Self-Centred	8	Loud noisy. Insensitive to others		
	9	Centre of attention. Can be on own. Might swing to 2		
	10	Centre of attention. Can never be on own. Easily swing to 2.		

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This evaluation is not specifically about the workings of the AERO model, but of its impact, as perceived by a sample of the students who have experienced it directly and other key stakeholders who have witnessed the effects.

FINDINGS

The central component of the study was an evaluation of the impact of the AERO method of intervention. Detailed notes made at the time of the interviews, and reviewed immediately following each one, were coded and analysed for themes. These are described below with illustrative quotes.

Self-knowledge

You find out things about yourself that you didn't know before ... you're learning about yourself. [Student D]

A recurring theme amongst the students was their experience of AERO as increasing their self-knowledge. How this happened will become apparent as we introduce the themes, but 'The Words' in particular were viewed as opening up areas for discussion that clearly surprised some of the young people. Self-knowledge was prized, too, as something desirable and a key to unlocking their problems and helping them take more control of their situations.

Awareness of others

It [AERO] works because it puts other people's views across to you so you can understand what you're doing and why it's affecting others. [Student J]

In addition to increasing self-awareness, some students remarked that AERO had broadened their understanding of other people's perspectives. This didn't happen out of the blue, but as a conscious element of the AERO method, in which students are asked to use the Words and the Scale in respect of other people in their lives. A decreasing level of empathy in the adolescent years has more recently been linked to changes in brain function, which probably gives rise to the practice wisdom that 'time helps', as the adolescent grows

into the adult. Useful though these neurological insights are, it does seem that cognitive-counselling approaches such as AERO can accelerate progress into more empathic territory and give young people more control over their neurological inheritance.

Catharsis of feelings

It makes you sort out your feelings, makes you recognise your feelings.

[Student H]. *You get everything out of your system.* [Student K]

Although the method starts with cognitive processes, it has a significant impact on feelings, too, by bringing them to the surface and by 'digging deep'. Ironical, given some criticisms of short-term interventions, that two students specifically used the notion of going deep: *'it dug deep, sorted it out, and then filled the hole'*. [Student F]

Partialising

It broke things down and made them manageable. We could go into detail. Instead of going straight to a conclusion we could look at things in turn. [Student F] *It's all jumbled in your head but this helps you put it into sections.* [Student K]

The AERO method follows a tradition of cognitive-based practices which partialise problems, goals and the like in order to make them more manageable. Some of the students describe this very process and reflect on it as a helpful one which enables them to 'sort things out'.

Focus

The Words helped me to think about why I came to see [the social worker] and helped me think about what to do. [Student A]

Closely related to the partialising process is the way the method puts the students' concerns into focus. It is both directive and non-directive; like the focus on a projector, AERO directs the student's attention, but *what* is projected is entirely up to the students themselves.

Choice

[What I liked best was] that it was me making choices. [Student K]

The control that the student has over the content of the session and the speed at which it moves is one of its attractions and a factor in its success. Many students mentioned the pleasure in alighting on one of the Words and taking it from there. Choice is an important consideration, not just in the detailed use of AERO, but also in the broader context. The students have chosen to see the school social work service, though they would prefer not to be in a situation where they need to make that choice; and, of course, some of their choices are constrained, perhaps because teachers have asked them to use the service.

Imagining

I'd think about how can I sort myself out and think about The Words discussion when I was getting angry. I'd think of myself in a different position on the [Scales] chart. [Student B]

The participants' testimony revealed the benefits of visualisation, in which a person sees themselves in a different, preferred situation. When they are in a recurring, unwanted situation it helps them to distance themselves from it. Seeing yourself in a different place on the Scale helps to bring that shift about. One student who was dyslexic was particularly pleased about the benefits of visualising the future on paper and having that to take away with her.

Future-oriented

The Words made me think about myself and my future. They made me able to think of positive things. [Student M]

All of the factors so far mentioned, such as partialising and imagining, have helped these students to move on from current problems and difficulties to position themselves in a more positive place from which to take action. Consideration of the Words and a self-application of the Scale has been a springboard to make plans and follow these through outside the session.

Lasting

My memory isn't too good, but I've still got pictures of The Words in my head. [Student F]

Although it was not an inclusion criterion for the sample, the longitudinal nature of the sample - from those currently in contact with the social worker or her student to those whose contact was anything up to two years ago - proved to be a useful insight into whether any effects were lasting. There is a degree of scepticism about short-term interventions, that they do not dig deep and that any benefits are unlikely to be sustained. This despite much research, starting with Reid and Shyne's (1969) classic study, that short-term interventions can be as effective and, when focused, more effective than long-term. If the brief intervention teaches the participant about how the intervention works, they are empowered to use it again when trouble strikes, avoiding the dangers of dependency that longer-term interventions can foster.

This current research is modest in sample size and it is possible that the young people had not suffered major trauma (the nature of the problems that brought them to the social worker was kept confidential); with these caveats, the findings do suggest that AERO has an impact on thoughts, feelings *and* behaviour that is of lasting value. Only one young person entered the interview with only a vague memory of her contact with the social worker but even she quite soon readily recaptured memories with the visual prompt of the Words.

Other considerations

Students mentioned other aspects that were not necessarily specific to AERO but contributed to their appraisal. One such was confidentiality, that their work with the social worker was private and separate from the classroom (Raines, 2004). Indeed, at least two students made both a link and a contrast between the AERO work and their classwork: *'You're missing a lesson, you're learning as well - it's educational'* [Student G]; and *'It was different from being in class, a different type of learning - for yourself rather than in a book'* [Student H].

The informal nature of the encounter was viewed positively. *'She didn't ask me about my problems we just found out what my problems were through the Words and things'* [Student L]; and *'You don't feel so nervous like you'd get with formal questions'* [Student D]. The work was paced for the individual the student. Student M noted that *'[The social worker] was patient, waited until I found out what was wrong and I could change. It wasn't a set time - I could talk as long as I wanted'*. It is the student, not the practitioner, who finds out these things.

Two students made direct comparisons between AERO and other methods:
I went on Anger Management but it didn't really help. They just told you what to do rather than what was behind it. This method got behind the reasons. [Student B] *It helps more than any other method, it's easier.* [Student F]

All 12 students were able to understand the method, with half making sense of it straight away and half coming to their understanding of it over time.

I made sense of it straight way. It was really easy to refer to. [Student F]

It was *doing it* that helped me to understand it. [Student A]

I didn't see it straight away. It was just kind of some words on a paper. You had to think about it. You had to work at it. [Student H]

AERO's two central techniques, the Words and the Scale, are flexible and can be used as a one-off session, or as part of a longer series of contacts. As Table 3 indicated, the number of contacts varied from 1 to more than 8 per student, and some students renewed contact after breaks. The techniques appear to have been very flexible and efficient in their use, with the method as a whole following the student rather than the other way round.

What changes did it make and how

11 of the 12 students were clear that the work with the social worker had made a difference - for some it was dramatic and immediate, for some it was a gradual process over time. This was not a generalised 'feel-good' that might occur as a result of any sustained attention, and all were quite specific about what the difference was. For one of these eleven students, this was less about changing and more about getting confidence in himself for who he was: *'I wasn't looking for change. What I learned from it was that I was alright, OK as I was. This gave me confidence that I was OK as I am'* [Student D].

The only student for whom the method did nothing was the 'demonstration student' [Student E] who was not invested in the process because she was not visiting the social worker with any problems or challenges, but to help demonstrate the method to a visiting outsider.

Examples of specific changes

- *It just built up my confidence - helped me to stick up for myself ... Gave me ideas about what to do to stop the bullying. It meant I found new friends and starting to be able to talk a lot more to different people.* [Student C]
- *I go out feeling happy about myself ... It's changed me a lot to be honest ... I was a bit of a bully. I'm now friends with lots of people. It's turned me around. It was totally different right from*

the beginning - I was answering back before seeing [the social worker], but people found out that I could change. [Student M]

- *I was very immature and it helped me to grow up. [Student F]*
- *I've started to behave better because I have more of a picture of what I can do. For example, when we spoke about Aspirations - for me, this is to get a good income. This helped me to think about what I can do with my life. [Student G]*
- *It takes a long time to change. I don't know. It was helping, but not straight away - it's small changes not a miracle cure. [Student H]*
- *It had an effect on my behaviour - it helped with my anger. [Student J]*
- *Mainly it was about my thinking - it made me see things in a different perspective ... Did affect feelings, too - makes you feel a lot better. [Student K]*
- *Changed how I think and therefore what I do in class. [Student L]*

Some were able to analyse *how* the change had come about, for others it just did, but all 11 attributed it to the work with the social worker.

The views of parent and professionals

The families and friends of the students are significant in their lives. Seven of the 12 students in the study talked to their families about the work; in five cases this was the mother and in two it was 'the family'. The difficulty of father involvement in the lives of children in school is well-documented (Osborne and Maidment, 2007). One student mentioned how his parents came to the school and took part in the Words activity.

I spoke to my mum about seeing [the social worker]. I plucked up courage to talk with my mum - [the social worker] had suggested me writing a letter but I wanted to talk to her. My mum was pleased that the school had managed to sort me out. She didn't see the book with the

Words and the Chart [the Scales] but I did tell her about them. [Student B]

One parent was interviewed. Her son had used AERO with the social worker over a number of months about two years ago and she was familiar with the Words and how they worked, even remembering that the words had been tailored to her son's situation. The social worker had been to the family home on a couple of occasions to use the method (Allen and Tracy, 2004), but most of the work was done with her son at the school. The parent valued the confidentiality agreement that had give her son *'some private space'*. She confirmed the students' comments about the ways in which she saw the method working: *'Everything was all over the place in his head and [AERO] puts it over simply and he can focus on certain things at certain times'*. She noted specific changes in her son's ability to read other people's feelings and in his ability to make friendships, and she attributed these changes to the sessions with the social worker. She noted that *'my daughter, Ellen, is 11 and she's having problems - tummy aches, not wanting to go to school - so I might use [AERO] with her. I might add Words for her situation'*. The way the method can connect student, school and family seems to be another aspect of its strength, since schools are central to any community, 'one of the few real social capital networks left' (Gulland, 2008: 22).

Another group of significant others are the staff at Wellworth School. As noted earlier, six interviews were conducted with staff and the interview schedule was modified to accommodate these different perspectives.

The Head had read the AERO Guide and for him the important factor was that AERO fitted with his philosophy for the school. It helped to support his policy of achieving considerable reductions in exclusions (see Tables 1 and 2) whilst maintaining academic standards. The head viewed the behaviour that leads to exclusions as almost always about social and personal stresses and he believed that social work in general, and AERO in particular, helped students to reduce those stresses. He saw many other advantages in having a school-based social worker: security that there is 'someone who knows the ropes'

when it comes to matters of social care and child protection and who can get out there when necessary (the local authority social workers 'seem very distant'); access to knowledge and services that teachers can't be expected to have (Jonson-Reid, 2007); and a link with the university through the provision of social work placements. Also, he had confidence because he knew the school's social worker was '*not a walk-over*' and she held the line. At a time when the school might have to think about cutbacks he was clear that the school social work and student and family support service would be maintained intact.

The deputy head was equally positive and thought that both AERO and the school social worker model should become universal and was committed to employing a social worker in any school where she becomes head.

The assistant head had a general understanding of AERO, '*but specifically I refer students to [the social worker]. Examples are of a very unhappy, disaffected girl. [The social worker] helped the girl to explore her sexuality. Things she could discuss with [the social worker] that she couldn't with me. I just saw her as an unhappy adolescent - but [the social worker] discovered quite a few things, like a possible diagnosis of dyspraxia*'. She has seen visible changes in students as a result of using AERO and makes the observation that '*a particularly interesting aspect of AERO is that it is universal - good for anybody to do, not just for when things are wrong*.' Like the head and deputy head she would like to see social workers in all schools.

The classroom assistant works in the class setting and also in the Personalised Learning Centre. She had read the AERO guidebook and remarked that she is using it with her own daughter '*who's a bit school phobic - I'm putting it into practice at home with her, using her for practice! ... It's getting my daughter to look at things in a different way (and me, too)*'. Her husband also became intrigued and used The Scale.

The student social worker was introduced to AERO in her first week on placement and chose to use it. The student had four observations of the

social worker using AERO before employing it herself, with nine students by the time of the interview. *'It fits well with the task-centred approach which I've been using a bit of, too'.* She felt that the students *'have often been told by other people (their parents, etc.) what kind of person they are, but this gives them a chance to think about it for themselves - who they are, what kind of person they are.'* In terms of her learning, she found AERO was a useful guide for her work as she was new to school-based work. She thought the model would generalise beyond schools and to adults and younger children, too.

The social worker's perspective is a unique one, as the person who has developed the AERO method (Bramble, 2008a). Her starting point was a philosophy that gives some purpose to the students and their beliefs, gives them encouragement to make realistic changes. The adaptability of the method is a strength, since it means different things to different people. *'The starting point is the student themselves, it's how they interpret it'.* The motivation to develop AERO came from her own experiences of school phobia and a sense of the wasted potential of many children and young people; and an absence of readily-available tools and techniques that could be used in a relatively informal way. AERO is very unusual in springing from a practitioner and her everyday practice rather than through academic study and research. Part of the flexibility is that aspects of AERO can be used one-off to great effect, but that the social worker also works systemically, quite often finding ways of involving parents who are affected by their children's difficulties, often even more than the school.

I've used it informally with parents because they have been interested in it. It's often been with the child showing their parents how they're using it and it's revealed things that they've thought they should have known about the child. We get to a stage where the kid shares information with me that I think would help their relationship with the parent, so I tell them I think it's time to tell your parents about this. I ask if they would like me to help them to do that and quite a few like me to do it that way. Other kids have used it to write a letter to their parents. Sometimes they

read the letter out loud to me first and other times they just take it home to their parents with very positive outcomes. [Social worker].

AERO: possible changes

Prompted by a question asking for ideas for changes, five of the 12 students had suggestions. The only change mentioned by more than once concerned the language, especially in the Scales, where 'hermit' and 'typical view of USA' were thought inappropriate by some. Some of the class assistants had also queried 'hermit'. Two students wondered whether other students might struggle with the Words, though they understood them themselves. One suggestion was to use a scale with the Words, '*so you'd score how important it is to you*' [Student G]. The dyslexic student would have preferred an overview of what it was all about beforehand. The parent suggested that a younger child might fare better with pictures.

Interestingly, the only really critical student was one who had not gone to see the social worker with a specific problem, but who had agreed to be a 'demonstration student' for an outsider visiting the school. This student noted:

I think there's too much detail and it felt like doing a test rather than just being able to talk ... though I did feel a bit under pressure because I was being used as an example. [Student E]

This student was the only one in the random sample of 12 who, overall, was critical of the method, but her circumstances are tellingly different from the others.

Discussion

Limitations of the study

Before considering some of the more general lessons from this evaluation, there are certain important caveats. First, even when we have established

that there has been a change in behaviour, feeling or thinking, there is always a difficulty in separating out the various factors that can contribute to change and, therefore, establishing causal relationships. It is also complex to determine how much is due to the *method* and how much is the *person* of the social worker. This was one of the reasons why it was important to evaluate the student social worker's use of the method, also.

In the face of these uncertainties, what can be established with some certainty is the degree to which the participants make their own associations and causal links between any changes they have experienced and the AERO work. Through discussion in a relaxed environment with a randomised range of people who have experienced or are currently experiencing the method, we can begin to understand what, if any, associations they have made. From the findings detailed earlier, it is evident that the people involved made clear connections between the method of work and the changes that were experienced, and that others not directly involved noted these changes, too.

Possibilities arising from the findings

AERO provides a model of school social work practice that is well-received by the students who experience it directly and well-regarded by the families and staff who are in a position to note any changes in the young people. Although the nature of the problems that brought the students to the social worker was not disclosed, it is clear that the tools can work with problems wherever they are centred (home, school etc). They have been used by adults (the parents of students) as well as young people and show every sign of being readily transferable to settings outside school social work. They are adaptable and efficient, and their effects are lasting. The students appreciate their ease of use and the confidential space that is given to them. The AERO method has the effect of helping the students to make realistic plans that work for them. As such, it is reasonable to infer that it helps to sustain the school's broader policy of social inclusiveness, which is given its clearest expression in the dramatic decrease in school exclusions.

An obvious but potentially overlooked element is the fact that these changes have occurred in a mainstream service, not as part of a special project with additional time and resources. The school social worker is funded from the school's existing budget (.6 FTE) and the AERO method requires no elaborate technology or glossy, expensive manual, just some paper and the accompanying Guide. It is an easily understood technique, developed by a practising social worker, and requiring relatively minimal training, as demonstrated by the student social worker and the class assistants. It has proved itself to be readily established and easily sustained; as such, it can be regarded as highly transferable, not just to other schools but to many other settings in which social workers are employed.

All of these findings point to considerable potential for schools and, indeed, for social work itself. This service also reveals the potential for social work to rediscover itself as an active profession at the heart of its community, with high visibility and a clearly preventative role, spending a high percentage of its time in face to face contact with the people it serves. However, it is mindsets that will need to expand and not budgets. The dramatic changes in school exclusion events have not as yet registered any curiosity even in the school's own Southshire hinterland. It seems, then, that the bigger challenge is finding ways in which minds can be opened to the lessons of quiet successes such as the school social work service at Wellworth.

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Appendix: Semi-structured interview schedule used with the students

The student was shown to the interview room from their class. After introductions there was a brief preamble which reprised the Information Sheet they had been given some days before, and reassurances about the privacy of the interview and the purposes of the study.

1 Just remind me, how long is it since you saw [the social worker]?

How often did you meet and over what period of time?

This aimed to get a measure of how focused their memory is; how reliable the rest of their testimony is likely to be.

2 What did you think about this way of working?

An open question to see what aspects the student focused on first without prompt. 'The Words' and 'The Scale' were to hand as a visual reminder.

3 How do you think this way of working [AERO] works?

Aimed to throw light on their understanding of the model.

4 Did this way of working make sense to you straight away? or later? when?

Threw light on how intuitive the model is. Do people struggle with it?

5 What did you like most about this way of working?

Elicited some specific evaluative data and unpicked the AERO method so we could see if some aspects seemed to be more effective than others.

6 Are there any things that you would change about this way of working?

Again, to elicit some specific evaluative data.

7 In what ways did working in this way change the way you were thinking and/or behaving and/or feeling?

Elicit some specific examples.

8 Did you talk to your friends or your family about this work?

To consider how/if their learning through AERO was transferred or generalised at all.

9 Do you think other people noticed any changes in you? If so, what?

Aimed to 'triangulate' - find out if there were observable changes that others were aware of, too.

10 If your friend was in a similar situation to the one you were in when you came to see [the social worker], would you recommend your friend to come to see her?

And would you recommend they used this method of working [AERO]? If so, why particularly? If not, why particularly?

Have you got a 'quote' that would sum it up for somebody who hadn't experienced it?

Another way to elicit evaluative data, this time by distancing - speaking for some-one else not themselves, but reflecting their own views.