

Learning from Experience: Formation for the Ministry of Educational Leadership and Group Relations Programs.

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The primary focus of this Paper is to present an overview of Group Relations Training Programs as a method of leadership formation. This method of experiential education offers a potentially effective instrument for the ongoing formation of leaders in Catholic educational institutions. The Paper begins with a reminder of the significance of lay leadership in Catholic schools, both originally and currently. It then proposes that the ecclesial perspective on the role of teachers in Catholic schools has implications for the exercise of leadership in Catholic education. This discussion forms a brief background to a description of the theoretical basis of group relations work and its potential for providing insights into organisational culture.

In his Paper "Mythic Foundations of Australian Catholic Schools Assessing the Heritage for Religious Educators" Maurice Ryan (2001) outlines the history of lay involvement in Catholic Education in Australia. He suggests that when Catholic Schools began in Australia they were largely staffed by lay people and were open to children from Catholic and non-Catholic families. In response to changes in Government funding Catholic schools later became overwhelmingly led by local and imported Religious. Thus it can be argued that the current situation is more a return to origins than a sign of decline or a cause for concern. The Guide to Educational Resources for the Sydney Archdiocese (Catholic Education Office, 2007) lists 160 lay people in senior leadership roles in schools. There are 17 Religious in the same roles. This means over 90.4 % of Catholic Principals in the Sydney Archdiocese are lay people. In 2006 the figure was 85%. It would seem that Catholic education is likely to remain largely in the hands of lay people. (CEO, 2006)

It could be argued that Catholic schools and Catholic welfare agencies are the public face of the Church for many people today. Many parents, who do not go to Church for a variety of reasons, choose to send their children to Catholic schools. The parents of many of the students who currently attend Catholic

schools are “unchurched”. Anecdotally Priests report that at Masses for parents they need to give basic instructions for people to be able to participate.

As publicly appointed representatives of the Church, leaders in Catholic schools are involved in ministry. Evangelisation is one of the tasks of Catholic schools. Teachers in Catholic schools share in this task as a consequence of accepting a position in a Catholic school. (See for example National Catholic Education Commission, 1984)

The ecclesial nature of the Catholic school has been consistently articulated in a series of documents from Rome authored by the Congregation for Catholic Education. These documents articulate the Church’s perspective of the teacher in Catholic schools. For example the document *Lay Catholic In Schools: Witness to Faith* (1982) states

The teacher is not simply a professional person who systematically transmits a body of knowledge in the context of a school, “teacher” is to be understood as “educator” – one who helps to form human persons. The task of a teacher goes well beyond transmission of knowledge, although that is not excluded. Therefore, if adequate professional preparation is required in order to transmit knowledge, then adequate professional preparation is even more necessary in order to fulfil the role of a genuine teacher. It is an indispensable human formation and without it, it would be foolish to undertake any educational work (par.16)

In this view the educator is more than simply a teacher as a conduit of knowledge, rather she/he is one who helps *form* human persons. By implication the leaders in a Catholic educational institution will necessarily also have a role in the ongoing human formation of teachers.

The Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan, in his seminal work *Insight*, writes about the nature of learning as needing sustained effort;

To be talented is to find that one’s experience slips easily into the intellectual pattern, that one’s sensitive spontaneity responds quickly and precisely to the

exigencies of mind. Insights come readily. Exact formulation follows promptly. Outer sense pounces upon significant detail. Memory tosses out immediately the contrary instance. Imagination devises at once the contrary possibility. Still, even with talent, knowledge makes a slow, if not bloody entrance. To learn thoroughly is a vast undertaking that calls for relentless perseverance. (Lonergan 1992, p 209-10)

Lonergan reminds us that all learning is difficult and hard won.

This Paper is grounded in the premise that the exercise of leadership in human service organisations is radically relational. As such, the exercise of leadership involves some understanding of, and focus upon,

- the developmental history of the leader,
- the existing culture of the system he or she is attempting to influence and organise,
- the culture of the larger system in which this institution is but a part and
- the make-up and developmental history of those the leader is called to lead and manage.

I contend that the exercise of leadership is not the formulaic application of worn out ideologies, outcomes driven directives or the main points from books like, *Ten tips for leaders*, *Leadership for Dummies* or even *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The seven habits might become effective if their use went beyond two weeks of diminishing practice and actually became habitual ways of acting. It seems to me however that more often than not, after about two weeks the *Seven Habits* workshop folder is placed closed, on the bookshelf next to the other leadership workshop folders, with a note to self, “to be revisited when things are not so busy”.

Tips, Key Performance Indicators, Outcomes and Habits may be useful structures for some very busy people but they can also be used as a barrier to hide behind. This Paper proposes a framework which locates leadership as service, that is leadership is essentially about how the leader relates to those whom he/she is called to serve. In the quote from *Insight* cited above,

Lonergan reminded us that all learning is difficult and hard won. I want to suggest that learning that impinges on the psychic life of the learner is particularly difficult as unconscious defences can sabotage the conscious desire to learn. This dynamic can lead to flights from understanding and sometimes flights into fantasy. Participation in Group Relations Programs can be helpful in stimulating insights into unconscious flights from understanding.

Learning and Group Relations Programs

A Group Relations Program is an experiential education process which can be conducted over a couple of days or, more thoroughly, in a residential setting over the period of one or two weeks. The program involves the intensive study of authority, leadership and autonomy, as individuals take part in a temporary institution. (Young 2006a) The process involves members monitoring their own experience of participating in the group and institutional dynamics of the event. This form of experiential learning concentrates on interpreting the constantly shifting, dynamic unconscious processes which mediate the relations between the individual and the group in the 'here and now' (Young 2006a)

The events can provide a rich resource for learning on how to think about issues of leadership, role, authority and organisation.

Group Relations is a method of study and training in the way people perform their roles in the groups and systems to which they belong." (Group Relations 2006) "A group may be said to be two or more people interacting to achieve a common task". (Group Relations 2006) Educational institutions, by their very nature, involve groups, systems, leaders, followers and varying levels of authority. "The basis of group relations theory is that groups move in and out of focusing on their task and a number of different defensive positions based on unarticulated group phantasy." (Group Relations) This statement is at the heart of Group Relations work and the remainder of the paper concentrates on the development this idea.

In group relations work, learners are put in situations in which anxieties often arise. The situations are designed to be safe and contained enough so that it is just possible for participants to see the anxieties in operation and to think about them. The role of staff members in such events is to aid participants in the discovery, study and transformation of unconscious group and systemic processes. At times, these processes can take the form of poisonous projections and group madness. Staff members do this through interpretations designed to help the participants to understand the situation of being in the grip of “psychotic” anxieties.(Young, 2006b) Staff are able to do this through their specialist training in working with projections and transferences.

Group relation training programs consist of a number of different experiential teaching-learning exercises or events. A central event is the Small Study Group. This group consists of 9-12 members and a staff consultant. The group meets to study its own behaviour in the here and now. Another event is the Large Study Group. This event includes the entire membership of the Conference, which may be 70 or more and 2 or more staff consultants. The task of this event is the same as the Small Study Group, that is, to study its own behaviour in the here and now. A third teaching-learning exercise is the “Inter-Group event”. In this exercise the membership are invited to form themselves into groups and study the interrelatedness of groups in the here and now. Another inter-group event is the Institutional Event. In this teaching-learning exercise the focus of study is the member-staff relationship within the Conference institution as a whole. Toward the end of the conference there is what is called Review and Application Groups. This exercise is the beginning of the task, that will continue long after the conclusion of the Conference, of making links between the experience of the conference, what has been learnt, and its application in his or her own workplace.

Group Relations Training Programs draw on a range of influences including the work of two British Psychoanalysts; Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion.

Melanie Klein was an analyst who specialised in working with children. Initially grounded in Freudian theory, Klein developed her own contribution to

psychoanalytic theory and practice. For Klein, development during the very earliest months and years of life after birth significantly influences the structure of the personality that will endure throughout life. According to Klein, early development is comprised of two distinct, but overlapping positions: the *paranoid-schizoid* position and the *depressive* position. In the *paranoid-schizoid* position the ego is split and unacceptable parts of the ego are evacuated from the ego and projected onto or into an object in the environment. In Klein's *depressive* position, or state of readiness, a person is able to contain both "acceptable" and "unacceptable" parts of the *self* and is able to think about them as parts of a whole *self*.

Developing this line of thought theologically, this idea promotes a view of a whole person as one who recognises that he or she is radically *not whole*. We might identify this with what the British Benedictine Sebastian Moore describes as a "wobble" at the heart of an individual's being. A wobble that is psychologically prior to sinfulness which Moore names as Original sin. (Moore 1985 p. xiii) A person operating in the *depressive* position also accepts that he or she is in need of ongoing conversion, growth and healing. Through a theological lens, this recognition by the individual of their need for growth, forgiveness and healing, is an instance of individual conversion. This conversion manifests as a reorientation away from a primary concern with *self* to a re-centering of one's desire towards the ultimate source of love, God; Father, Son and Spirit. Such a view is in stark contrast to the popular vision of wholeness which is variously portrayed as self-actualisation, balance, being at one with the universe or being in a state where one feels totally in charge and in control of one's environment.

In Klein's view the *paranoid-schizoid* and *depressive* positions are not simply transitory or passing phases or stages; they set up the basis of the psyche's enduring orientation throughout life. Depending on the level of integration and the amount of subjective stress, elements of oscillation between the two positions (Gould, 1997, p. 2) is a phenomenon that can often be observed. The potential for oscillation is often actualised when a person is in a state of heightened anxiety and subjective stress. Such a state may be evoked in a

Group Relations Program because the group phenomena examined activates primitive and primary emotional experiences.

Building on the idea of splitting (schizoid) and projection, Klein articulated the concept of projective identification. Klein observed that when split-off parts of the ego are projected onto another person, the recipient of the projection to varying degrees, takes in the evacuated, split-off, parts and experiences them as if they were part of him or her.

Klein's theory implies that through the dynamic of projective identification we actually, unconsciously, affect each other's emotions and behaviours. This dynamic can have profound implications when two or more gather. If those who have a leadership role in an educational institution are to retain personal psychic health and develop life-giving communities of learning, it is vital that they become aware of the potentially destructive projections that might be dumped onto them and how these projections might affect them. They also need to be aware that in their authoritative role, through unconscious processes, they have the potential to detrimentally affect those whom they are called to serve through leadership.

We now move on to the work of Wilfred Bion. Building on Klein's work, Wilfred Bion discovered that when people gather in groups the process of mutual influence through splitting and subsequent projective identification, gave rise to some specific group and organisational manifestations. The basic tension between reality and phantasy experienced in the individual, produces a particular set of manifestations when two or more people gather to do a task together. Bion observed that whilst groups stated that they were intent on performing a primary task, in fact the group often acted in ways that were inconsistent with completing this task.

Bion distinguished two main tendencies in the life of a group: the tendency towards work on the primary task or *work-group* mentality and a second, often unconscious tendency to avoid work

on the primary task, which he termed *basic assumption* mentality.

These opposing tendencies can be thought of as the wish to face and work *with* reality and the wish to evade it when it is painful or causes psychological conflict within, or between group members. (Stokes, 1994, p.20)

When a group is operating in *work-group* mentality the members of the group are focussed on carrying out specific tasks and are keen to assess their effectiveness in doing so. When a group is operating in *basic assumption* mentality, the group's behaviour is "directed at attempting to meet the unconscious needs of its members by reducing anxiety and internal conflicts". (Stokes, p.20)

"According to Bion, much of the irrational and apparently chaotic behaviour we see in groups can be viewed as springing from *basic assumptions* common to all their members." (Stokes, p.20) Bion's genius was identifying *basic assumption* mentality as the reason for much of the irrational and apparently chaotic behaviour we see in groups and organisations. "Bion distinguished three basic assumptions, each giving rise to a particular complex of feelings, thoughts and behaviour, *basic assumption dependency*, *basic assumption fight-flight* and *basic assumption pairing*." (Stokes p.21) Although a group or organisation may be generally characterised by either a *work-group* mentality or one of the three *basic assumption* mentalities, groups and organisations often dance between *work-group* mentality and one or other of the three *basic assumptions* groups in turn.

Basic assumption *dependency*

In a group dominated by basic assumption *dependency*, group members expect the leader to look after and protect them. In short there is an unconscious expectation that the leader will collude with their need to make the real purpose of the group the meeting of

their unconscious needs. When this happens, the leader serves a pathological form of dependency which inhibits growth and development.

In groups dominated by basic assumption *dependency*

Any attempts to change the organisation are resisted, since this induces a fear of being uncared for. The leader may be absent or even dead, provided the illusion that he or she contains the solution can be sustained. Debates within the organisation may then be not so much about how to tackle present difficulties as about what the absent leader would have said or thought. (Stokes, p.21)

Basic assumption *fight-flight*

In a group dominated by basic assumption *fight-flight* the group members work under the unconscious assumption that there is a danger on the horizon or an “enemy” that should be attacked or fled from.

According to this theory the sense of common enemy

provides a spurious sense of togetherness, while also serving to avoid facing the difficulties of the work itself. Alternatively, such a group may spend its time protesting angrily, without actually planning any specific action to deal with the perceived threat. (Stokes, p.21)

Basic assumption *pairing*

In a group dominated by basic assumption *pairing* the group members believe that whatever the actual problem might be, some future event will solve it.

The group behaves as if pairing or coupling between two members within the group, or perhaps between the leader of the group and some external person, will bring about salvation. The group is focused entirely on the future, but as a defence against the difficulties of the present. (Stokes, p.21)

A group dominated by basic assumption *pairing* is not really interested in working practically towards this future, “but only in sustaining a vague sense of hope as a way out of it’s current difficulties”. (Stokes, p.21)

The primary task of this Paper has been to present a brief overview of some aspects related to Group Relations processes and their potential applicability to the task of ongoing formation of men and women as leaders in Catholic educational institutions. To this end, it has been argued that all learning is difficult, long-term and hard won and that learning that impacts on our physic life is particularly difficult.¹

In the 6th Century Gregory the great wrote of pastoral leadership

No one ventures to teach any art unless he has learned it after deep thought. With what rashness, then, would the pastoral office be undertaken by the unfit, seeing that the government of souls is the art of arts!(science of sciences). For who does not realise that the wounds of the mind are more hidden than the internal wounds of the body. (St Gregory the Great, 1978, Ch.1)

Experiential learning through group relations processes is challenging hence discernment with regard to an individual’s readiness to engage in this work is vitally important. With systemic support and prudent timing, Group Relations processes offer experiential insight into group and organisational dynamics and the individual’s role in them. The Paper has suggested that leaders in Catholic schools have a servant role and contribute to a institutional culture that gives witness to the Gospel.

¹ Group Relations Australia is the major organisation in Oceania working in the area of group relations, its website is www.grouprelations.org.au

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