schools are so deeply embedded. These denials give rise to fragmenting and part-solutions that keep anxieties locked in schools, with all the damage and despair this can mean for those who work within them.

The anxieties this chapter has attempted to trace are simultaneously located deep within the inner worlds of individuals, in the communities they serve, and in the sociopolitical systems within which modern day's schools exist. Profound anxieties arising in the face of globalized and increasingly complex markets have come home to roost in schools at a time when the breakdown of the supporting structure has severely damaged the capacity to tolerate extreme anxiety. Unless the systems of support for teachers and head teachers can be bolstered in some meaningful way, the organizational task as well as the health and well-being of individuals will always be threatened by the anxieties that underlie the education system.

Note

1. Research by the think-tank Resolution Foundation and the London School of Economics (Plunkett & Pessoa, 2013) found that the number of people in middle-paid roles fell by 170,000 to 14.61 million between 2008 and 2012; over the same period, the number of people in low-paid employment rose by 190,000 to 7.86 million and the number of best-remunerated jobs increased by 140,000 to 6.79 million.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Work discussion groups as a container for sexual anxieties in schools

Emil Jackson

This chapter explores the use of work discussion groups, offered to teachers,[1] as one important method of helping teachers address, explore, and contain a range of anxieties within school settings. In particular, this chapter aims to illustrate the ways in which work discussion groups can provide teachers with a unique space—not usually offered elsewhere—to process intense anxieties evoked when the student–teacher relationship and learning environment is disturbed by matters relating to sexuality.

Anxiety as an ordinary feature in school life

At the most basic level, the very essence of any learning environment involves the management of effective levels of anxiety. When the level of challenge is set too low for a student or class group, they will soon "switch off" and become disengaged through under-stimulation and boredom. Equally, when the level of challenge is set too high, students can become flooded with anxiety in a way that has an adverse impact on what they are able to absorb. In contrast, outstanding teaching and learning usually involves teachers stretching students out of their comfort zone into new and unfamiliar territory, which, by its very nature, generates some anxiety—but in a way that feels safe and supportive—

engaging students in a way that keeps them alert, attentive, and stimulated (cf. Vygotsky, 1978).[2]

More broadly, the nature and trajectory of school life requires children, parents, and their teachers to develop the capacity to manage and contain a multitude of ordinary—and ordinarily intense—anxieties. Within secondary education, for example, these include anxieties relating to the transition from primary to secondary school; the painful process of separation from family towards greater independence and autonomy; discovering one's own identity amidst the development of peer-group relationships and pressures; managing the stress of exams; and leaving school and facing an uncertain future.

Anxieties often increase dramatically around puberty, when the pace of bodily and hormonal changes can leave adolescents feeling besieged by unfamiliar thoughts, feelings, and impulses. Some are left feeling like virtual strangers in their own body. Sexual and aggressive urges are felt to be especially threatening, particularly when they are experienced in relation to family members. Adolescents are then driven to export much of their energy away from their family and into the school environment, where it is discharged and transferred onto relationships with fellow students and teachers.

Sexuality and sexual anxieties in schools

Given that the student population in secondary schools is almost entirely comprised of adolescents who are charged with burgeoning hormones, one would expect sparks of sexuality to be present nearly everywhere. And not just between the adolescents. It is, for example, completely normal—even healthy, within reason—for adolescent students to become infatuated with and have all sorts of sexual fantasies about their teachers. However, when the pace of change within their developing bodies and minds is at its peak, many young people struggle to differentiate between feelings of intimacy and sexuality—especially with those teachers to whom they have become attached.[3] While this process is essentially "normal" from a developmental perspective, it can nevertheless generate intense anxiety and confusion for all concerned.

What is striking here is not the rather ordinary phenomena and anxieties I have described above. Instead, what is striking is that despite the fact that these phenomena are common-place and although almost all teachers agree that the student–teacher relationship lies at the heart of effective learning, they receive almost no input whatsoever in this area within initial teacher training or subsequent professional development and in-service training (INSET). And if this area is overlooked, then the whole area of student–teacher crushes and fantasies is treated as virtually taboo. More often than not, for example, there seems to be some sort of half-conscious group process that ensures that teachers turn a blind eye to uncomfortable issues such as these, ignoring them or, at most, laughing them off as if they were some sort of joke. All of this tends to leave staff at greater risk of isolation and with little support or training in how to prevent, manage, and diffuse potentially problematic situations from arising. This can unfortunately result in situations arising that are indeed very serious—and anything but funny.

For these reasons, this chapter focuses on the potential for work discussion groups (WDGs) to provide teachers with a unique space in which they can be helped to process and contain sexual anxieties that are inevitably evoked in the ordinary course of school life.

The work discussion group model

Work discussion groups are one of the most central and highly valued models of training and supervision that have been developed at the Tavistock Centre over the past 60 years. The evolution of the work discussion methodology has been well described in the book by Rustin and Bradley (2008). The more specific application and evaluation of WDGs in educational settings has also been described in some detail by, for example, Jackson (2002, 2008) and Warman and Jackson (2007). To the best of my knowledge, the potential for WDGs to help teachers process and contain anxieties evoked by matters relating to sexuality in schools is not something that has been written about previously.

Put simply, WDGs in schools offer teachers a regular opportunity to share and think through any anxieties, dilemmas, or challenges that are preoccupying them in relation to their work with students and class groups. Each meeting would be likely to involve one or two teachers outlining a current concern, which would then be more fully explored and discussed with the group, facilitated by an external consultant—a bit like a group consultation. Rather than primarily seeking a specific solution or direction for the "presenter"[4] to take, WDGs aim to open up different ways of seeing and thinking so as to generate a deeper understanding of what might be happening beneath the surface. Within educational settings, WDGs would frequently involve discussions about students who are causing concern and whose academic or emotional development are at risk. Often, it is the students who manage to get under their teachers' skin, provoking

the strongest feelings in others, who are most helpfully considered. As one teacher put it when introducing her concern to the group, "It is not what the student says or does that I find most difficult, but rather the way it makes me feel". Following the group discussion, while being extremely careful to protect confidentiality, the presenter and others in the group are then free to take (or leave) whatever insights or suggestions feel most useful and helpful.

School-based WDGs are usually facilitated by an external consultant, often a child and adolescent psychotherapist, whose thinking and approach is underpinned by a combination of core psychoanalytic, group dynamic, and organizational concepts. It is often an understanding of processes such as projection, splitting, transference, and countertransference that are experienced as most helpful by teachers—even revelatory—though the language used to explore them within the WDG would be straightforward and void of terminology to ensure that everyone's understanding is maximized. WDGs with more senior members of the school leadership team might involve two external consultants co-facilitating—for instance, a child psychotherapist working together with an organizational consultant.

WDG meetings usually take place anything between weekly and monthly. They can be effectively offered to staff at any level of an organization—though group membership would usually comprise staff with similar roles and responsibilities. WDGs are best suited to staff who voluntarily opt to attend because of their own wish for learning and development.

The examples that follow are drawn from my experience, over the past 16 years, of facilitating WDGs with qualified and unqualified teachers, middle and senior leaders, and headteachers.

WDG Example 1

Some years ago I worked with Peter,[5] an empathic and thoughtful young man who was newly qualified as a teacher and had recently taken up his first substantive position. In his tutor group was a vulnerable 13-year-old girl who, sensing Peter's compassionate demeanour, quickly engaged with her teacher and sought him out for additional supportive discussions about her difficulties. Then, one day within his first term of teaching, the student made an allegation that Peter had behaved inappropriately towards her—inferring that he had made some sort of sexual approach. The school, needing to follow established procedures, had to suspend Peter while the allegation was properly

investigated. The investigation involved social services and continued for over a month before the student finally retracted her allegation about her teacher and reported that she was actually being sexually abused by her uncle. While Peter was relieved that his ordeal was finally over and he could return to school, he felt traumatized—all the more so because necessary protocols militated against the possibility of support or contact with colleagues—leaving him feeling horribly shamed, isolated, and helpless, with his sense of his credibility as a teacher and as a person feeling shredded, much as his student may well have been feeling.

Shortly after returning to work, Peter asked to join a fortnightly WDG set up to support teaching and support staff[6] in relation to their work with students. For some time, he contributed thoughtfully to presentations made by other members of staff but did not volunteer to share any of his own issues or concerns. Several months later, for the first time, Peter finally felt able to talk with his colleagues in the WDG about what had happened and how affected he was, and continued to be, by the experience. He described, for example, how "even now, when I see the student across the corridor, it impacts immediately on my whole physiology . . . making me tense up and feel anxious . . . I don't feel safe when I am anywhere near her". The sense of anguish he conveyed was palpable.

Peter then offered some more information about the original situation and how it had evolved from his perspective. He told us how he could sense that his student was having a tough time and had wanted to support her, but then he had started to develop a nagging concern that she was seeking him out more regularly and might be becoming overly attached and dependent. He didn't share this with colleagues or his line manager because he wasn't even sure there was anything to worry about, so he didn't want to waste their time. When this was further explored by group members, Peter also admitted his fear of being judged—for instance, in case his colleagues would think that her over-involvement was an indication that he had done something wrong.

There were a number of important elements to the discussion that followed. At one level, it was an enormous relief for Peter simply to be able to share what had happened more openly with his colleagues within a small-enough and safe-enough environment. He described, for example, how, until now, he had hardly felt able to look anyone in the eye—as if he feared his name and reputation had already been tainted forever. The capacity of the group to explore this in a receptive and non-judgemental manner left him feeling less ashamed within himself

as well as less shamed in the mind of his peers. This already felt to him as though a heavy burden had been lifted.

Within the WDG, members acknowledged what an awful experience this must have been for Peter and were compassionate towards their colleague. Some anger was initially expressed towards the student for making the allegation and towards the "management" for suspending the teacher. "How can they let the student come back into school after what she has done?" With some help in thinking about what might be going on from different perspectives, these angry feelings soon gave way to a sense of concern and appreciation about what the girl might have been enduring within her home environment and how meting out a permanent exclusion as punishment would also not have been a fair or helpful solution. Linked to this was also a greater awareness about some of the impossible choices parents and other family members might find themselves having to make in situations such as these—where there is no such thing as an ideal solution.

One member picked up on what a loss it must have been for the student to have her teacher's support withdrawn, even though it was withdrawn because of her own actions. Another teacher commented on how guilty she must have felt and terrified of what people at school would now think about her: "It isn't just her tutor's reaction that might scare her . . . can you imagine what her peers would think if they knew she had caused them to be robbed of their much liked teacher?!" Group members were then helped to make important connections between what the student was experiencing within her personal life and how aspects of this were repeated within the "school family", in particular within her relationship with her tutor. A number of significant parallels were noted, including the feelings of isolation; the reluctance to act on one's gut feeling that something was not right, for fear of being judged; feelings of having been wrongly violated and robbed without a means of protecting oneself; and feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and loss. The group were also alerted to the way in which their own reactions within this very discussion might be symbolic of a significant dynamic—for instance, the connection between their initial outrage that the girl was allowed to remain in the school "without recourse" and the student's likely outrage that the alleged "abuser" (the uncle) was allowed to continue to visit the home without being "excluded" from the family.

In the latter part of the discussion, the group returned to the teacher's earlier comment about what it was like to see the student across the corridor and how it continued to affect him. Members identified

with how difficult they would find it if they were in a similar position. The group also helped Peter to consider what, if anything, would help at this point—for example, whether a further facilitated meeting might be needed and, if so, what form this might take and whom it might involve.

By the end of the discussion, Peter looked quite different—as if an underlying sense of dread, rather like a dark cloud, was no longer hanging over his head. For the first time since he had returned to school, he said that he now felt a little less scared of walking the corridors and seeing the student. As much as benefiting from the insights gained from the *content* of what was discussed, Peter seemed to value the *experience* of sharing his experiences—and feeling heard—within the supportive setting of the WDG. To a large extent, this was also due to his understandable relief at discovering that his colleagues were concerned and accepting of him and validating of his experience without judgment. "Without judgement" in this context did not mean without robust exploration. For instance, it was important for both Peter and the group to acknowledge some of the hard but important lessons to be learnt—such as the reality that Peter had inadvertently underestimated the seriousness of this student's emotional state as well as his gut instinct that something wasn't quite right—and that this had prevented him seeking support at an earlier stage, leaving them both all the more isolated and at risk. In this respect, perhaps the most reparative element of the discussion for Peter was his sense of finally having been released from the solitary confinement of his experience and shame—something that he and others recognized might be a much longer and painful journey for the girl. The magnitude of this was evident some years later when I bumped into him in a social-like situation. On seeing me, he greeted me warmly and introduced me to his partner as the person who ran "the WDG that had literally saved his life".

WDG Example 2

First presentation

In a different WDG[7] offered to middle leaders[8] within a leadership training programme,[9] the absence of anyone having a specific issue they wanted to share created an opportunity for some free-flowing and exploratory discussion. I reminded the group that we now had an opportunity to think together about things that they never usually got a chance to discuss and wondered what this might include. There was

an immediate flurry of responses. These included: "how to handle male students flirting with or leering at female staff"; "dealing with difficult parents"; "working with students where there are no parents involved or where parents behave like children themselves"; "working with students who have suffered experiences such as trauma or bereavement"; "what to do when you feel that nothing makes any difference or when the student even seems to sabotage your attempts to help them". While acknowledging the importance and validity of all these issues, I followed the consensus in the group, which was that they wanted to focus on how to manage sexuality and sexualized behaviour. As one teacher put it, "It's so in your face sometimes and yet we never speak about it!"

One teacher, Sally, then described her difficulties with a group of 15- to 16-year-old boys from a Middle Eastern country. She spoke about how they would stare at her in lessons and in the corridor while sniggering in their own language. It made her feel uncomfortable, and she didn't know how to handle it. Group members played this down at first, reassuring Sally that her description sounded ordinarily flirtatious, given that they were a bunch of adolescent boys testing out their prowess and alpha-male status—posturing with each other as much as with her. When Sally continued to speak about how apprehensive she felt about the prospect of being left in the classroom on her own with them, the group's attitude changed and people agreed she was right to take it seriously.

Sally's description generated a range of responses within the group discussion, including an emphatic reiteration about how rarely these issues are ever discussed in schools, despite their prevalence. After some (perhaps necessary) space to sound off about the rude behaviour of some students, the tone of the discussion soon settled down. Some members picked up on the cultural background of the boys and whether there were gender inequalities that might impact on the way they treated women. Others linked this with their own experiences of boys from other cultures where women were felt to have a more subservient place.

The initial discussion was infused with a hint of anger and judgment and perhaps a sense of "those boys deserve what's coming to them". However, the level of interest in and compassion towards the boys increased when the group were invited to consider what else might be going on for them. At this point, someone noted that they were all Year 11 boys, approaching their GCSEs with little hope of achieving the grades necessary to remain in sixth form. Others commented on

how difficult it would be for them to get a place in another school or to secure paid work within a challenging job market, especially given that most of them apparently had limited support from their families.

The group then engaged in a thoughtful discussion about the range of insecurities these boys might be experiencing and how they were now potentially facing the loss of their "alpha-male status" within the school, along with all the protection it provided them from the realities and demands of life. One of the teachers wondered whether the boys themselves might secretly feel intimidated by what lay ahead. Another commented on how they might be the ones who really feel humiliated—connecting this to the way Sally had described herself feeling in relation to the boys. Sally agreed with this, noting how they always left her "feeling stupid . . . perhaps this is how they feel underneath".

With the benefit of some exploration and greater understanding, there was also some pragmatic and solution-focused discussion about the range of approaches that Sally (and others in a similar situation) might take. Members agreed that different approaches might be needed depending on how the boys and their behaviour were understood—for instance, whether they felt more like ordinary flirtations, which one might ignore or diffuse lightly, in contrast with something that felt more actively intimidating (whether conscious or unconscious), which may need to be addressed differently and more directly. Members shared, for example, their uncertainty about how to respond when the boys were talking in a foreign language. One teacher suggested that Sally might show them she wasn't threatened by simply stopping and looking at them firmly for a few moments without saying anything and then continuing on her way. On balance, though, members thought it was safer not to engage with them in moments like this, given that Sally was not sure what the boys were actually saying and that this might unnecessarily escalate tensions.

As the discussion progressed and became embedded in reflection rather than reaction, the atmosphere of underlying animosity towards the boys decreased markedly. In this respect, when consideration was given to whether Sally might need to share her concerns with and seek support from other staff (and managers) in the school, it was not fuelled by a wish to report the boys in the spirit of retribution (as it might have been at the start of the discussion) but, rather, to help Sally manage them, and herself, more effectively.

Sally was appreciative for the help the group had offered her. Even though she still felt a bit anxious about having to face them the

following day, she said she felt much less threatened and more solid in her sense of herself and her own authority.

Second (brief) presentation

As this discussion ended, another female teacher, Rolene, asked for a "few minutes" to share her concerns about a young newly qualified teacher (NQT) she was mentoring as part of her role. "The woman is an absolute goddess . . . neither the boys nor the girls can take their eyes off her and it can be quite disruptive to their learning in lessons!" She went on to describe her mentee's looks in such glowing terms that one of the male members asked which school she was working in and which subject she taught so they could look her up! There was some excitable laughter as Rolene added, "I am happily married but even I fancy her!"

When the group settled, Rolene admitted that despite her years of experience as a teacher and middle leader and despite her specific responsibility towards her mentee, she had not yet felt able to broach the subject of her looks. She wasn't sure whether she should raise it and was concerned she would "say it all wrong and just end up upsetting her colleague".

In the brief but focused discussion that followed, group members agreed that it was important for Rolene to find a way to talk with her mentee, although they acknowledged her sense of awkwardness about the prospect of raising the subject. Although everyone could relate to the dilemma, it was striking that no one in the group had ever managed to have such a conversation. The group were then helped to explore a number of possible approaches. These included the possibility that Rolene might "simply" ask her mentee rather frankly how she was managing the students' responses to her inside and outside the classroom, and whether she wanted some help to think about it. Rolene and others were interested in this more straightforward approach and agreed that if she could put this to her mentee in a rather matter-of-fact and non-critical way, it might reduce the possibility of either Rolene or her mentee being consumed with discomfort. They might then be able to have a more ordinary conversation about it which would probably be a support to the mentee and a relief to them both. I commented on how it wasn't just Rolene and her mentee who might be relieved, and I noted that people in the group also seemed calmer at the prospect of a manageable way forward. "It's true," one teacher responded, ". . . it's amazing how uncomfortable some of these basic conversations can feel . . . and somehow in school they never get discussed."

Third presentation

After Rolene indicated she had got what she needed from the discussion, a male member of the group, Adam, asked whether he could use the last part of the meeting to talk about his forthcoming school trip to Africa with his lower-sixth year group (16- to 17-year-olds). He added that he had not planned on talking about this at all, but the previous discussions had made him realize that he really needed to. "The thing is, . . . I work in an all-girls school and although there is a whole team of teachers going on the trip, I am one of only two men."

Tensions in the group were slightly raised when another member retorted to his introduction rather sharply, asserting that "all-girl trips should be staffed by all-female staff". Others disagreed with this and seemed protective of their male colleague as they argued the importance of a mixed-gender staff group for all students. I tried to contain the tensions by acknowledging the importance of these different views and people's entitlement to different perspectives. However, I emphasized that whatever we thought, Adam would soon be going on this trip and our task now was to help him think through his concerns. The group settled and re-directed their interest to Adam.

Adam reiterated that the previous discussion had made him realize that there had been no discussion or support in his school about how to manage students or tricky situations on the trip. He then gave an example of a recent social event at the school—a bit like a disco—and how "one of the girls had pinched his bum". This produced some immediate gasps and hilarity from other group members. I, too, found myself smiling and being carried along with the giggles. I then stopped the group and said, "Let's hold on and think about what's going on for a moment". I wondered how Adam felt about this at the time. Adam linked the group's reaction to his own, telling us that outwardly, at the time, he also laughed it off, but actually he didn't like it and found it quite embarrassing. No one had said anything about it to him, apart from one colleague who made some sort of a joke. "It was uncomfortable though." I wondered why people felt it was OK for us to laugh when it happens with a female student and a male member of staff and asked what people thought the reaction might be if this was a male student pinching the bum of a female member of staff.

The tone of the group changed immediately and led to a more serious discussion about whether or not there was a difference. One teacher thought it was different "because men are stronger and could therefore protect themselves, whereas with a male student it has a different feel". Another added that "the social perception about men being a greater threat makes it feel different". Rather touchingly, someone else stressed that "we women need to back up our male colleagues and protect them!"

As the discussion progressed, there was a sense of interest and engagement from all members. The anxieties and hilarity evoked by the issue soon settled as group members shared thoughts in a more grounded and straightforward way. As the discussion (and meeting) drew to an end, Adam and others agreed on the value of suggesting a meeting with the other staff members on the trip to think about how they are going to manage potentially tricky situations like bedtimes, one-to-one discussions, or more specific physical and bodily issues such as periods. Adam said that the discussion clarified that he did need to do this, adding gratefully that he felt much less awkward about raising it now and was sure that some of his other colleagues (female as well as male) would also appreciate it.

Sexual anxieties in staff

Given that issues relating to adolescent sexuality and student fantasies about staff are so difficult to address, how can schools begin to contemplate the even more unspeakable reality that teachers themselves may sometimes feel besieged with uncomfortably intense feelings towards their students—including sexual feelings. By this, I am not referring to teachers who are actually at risk of acting on their feelings in a wholly inappropriate, boundary-less, or abusive way. Rather, I am referring to teachers who, through their passion and commitment to their students' learning and well-being, coupled with their capacity to develop engaging relationships with them, get involved with students in a way that can sometimes feel confusing, intoxicating, or disconcerting due to them having some sort of sexual edge.

It is important to emphasize—and remind teachers—that the dynamics and difficulties being described here transcend age, gender, and sexual orientation of student and staff member alike. Having said that, it is also important to be aware of certain factors that may increase the likelihood of them occurring—such as in work with physically developed and sexually provocative adolescents who behave in an actively seductive way towards their teachers (whether consciously or unconsciously). This was vividly illustrated on one occasion when I said something to this effect in a WDG. In response, a female teacher told the group about her acute embarrassment and discomfort when she was persuaded to join in a game with some of her sixth-form students[10] on a summer residential trip. She told the group how, one night after dinner, she had been sitting around the campfire with students who were playing a game where one person uses a finger to spell out a word on someone else's arm and the other person has to work out what has been written. At some point, some of the students coaxed one of the confident and self-assured boys to write something on the teacher's arm. Although the teacher felt instantly uncomfortable, she was taken by surprise and didn't feel able to say "no" within the informal and social atmosphere of the trip. On the inside of the teacher's forearm, the student then gently wrote "I like you"—after which he looked up and gave her a knowing smile. The teacher was left feeling stumped, silenced, and seduced, all at once.

Similarly, it is also important to be mindful of the reality that even the most mature and talented of teachers may not yet have had adequate experience in school or in life to accurately calibrate optimal levels of temperature and distance within the learning relationship. This was vividly conveyed by a learning mentor who had the courage to bring to a WDG his difficulty in making the transition from being an ex-student in his school the previous year to being a staff member that year, and how he now had to work with some students who were, quite literally, also his friends.

Although in some ways, talking about staff sexuality is less uncomfortable than student sexuality, it can still feel terribly anxiety-provoking for staff to raise issues that might risk themselves or their colleagues being exposed or compromised in any way. This was evident in a multi-school WDG for middle leaders when one person cautiously described the toxic dynamics in their school, which, they believed, were rooted in the "worst-kept secret"—that their (married) headteacher was having an affair with one of the teaching assistants. Although the teacher described the behaviour of their Head as being "outrageous", he also conveyed loyalty to the school and spoke of his fear of what other WDG members would think of the Head and their school.

When faced with highly sensitive issues such as these, it is especially important for group members to feel that the WDG consultant can take a lead in a way that feels firm, containing, and safe. In this instance, for example, WDG members needed the consultant to interject early on, to

re-emphasize the need for absolute confidentiality among group members—including the consultant. The group also seemed relieved when the consultant re-emphasized the need to rein in any judgements we might have—however ordinary they may be—and to anchor ourselves instead in the spirit of thinking and trying to understand what might be going on, and how this situation might be affecting the presenters, and to explore how we might help them function as effectively as possible in the midst of it.

The need to provide support and containment for teachers

Within initial teacher training and subsequent professional development, there is a virtual absence of input relating to adolescent development. This gap in provision is especially striking given the centrality of the student–teacher relationship and the fact that disruptions to this relationship invariably result in disruptions to both teaching and learning. When the force of sexual development is felt to be overwhelming and aspects of sexuality intrude into the student–teacher relationship, anxieties are all the more acute and disruptions to the learning relationship are all the more likely. Paradoxically, schools often seem to turn a systemic blind eye to the difficulties emerging—perhaps because they do not feel equipped or confident about addressing it themselves. However, in certain situations, like some of those described in this chapter, it is dangerous—even potentially neglectful—to leave teachers inadequately supported or contained in their work. It is this lack of support and containment at a staff level which can later result in otherwise ordinary anxieties escalating into something more toxic within the student–teacher relationship.

WDGs are an effective method of addressing important gaps in professional development, support, and containment for teachers. The peer-group setting of the WDG, helped by the facilitation, contribution, and containment of an external consultant, provides teachers with regular opportunities to present and process their thinking about a range of issues, students, and concerns. This can feel like a unique and highly valued experience for all involved.

Over time, shared discussions of this nature will usually result in teachers experiencing a progressive level of understanding, tolerance, and confidence in containing and motivating challenging students. These benefits are further compounded by the group nature of the WDG, which increasingly enables group members to become a consultative resource for each other, independent of the external consultant. When WDGs are well established and well supported by management, the culture of consultation and containment between WDG members has the potential to extend into the wider culture of the school, triggering something akin to a cascade effect.

Teachers frequently report their relief on discovering that it is possible to explore anxiety-provoking issues non-judgementally within the WDG. In the case of uncomfortable and potentially exposing issues relating to sexuality and sexual development, the group discussion often leaves teachers feeling they have gained a renewed sense of clarity, control, and safety within themselves and their work relationships. The capacity for this to have a developmental, therapeutic, and even transformative impact on both teachers and students should not be underestimated.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my appreciation to Andrea Berkeley for the support she first offered me to develop WDGs in schools over fifteen years ago and the on-going support and backing she has consistently offered ever since.

Notes

1. "Teacher" is used as a generic term in this chapter to denote any member of staff working with students.
2. Although it is not the specific focus of this chapter, the same might equally be said in relation to the management of effective levels of anxiety, pressure, and support with staff.
3. The confusion between intimacy and sexuality is often at its peak in early adolescence.
4. The term "presenter" here is used to describe the person who is sharing an issue or concern with the group. This sharing, or presenting, does not involve any formal presentation as such—but, rather, a talking through of the situation, often illustrated with some more specific interactions with the student concerned.
5. All names and identifying details throughout this chapter have been changed to protect confidentiality.
6. Support staff in this instance primarily included Teaching Assistants and Learning Support Assistants.
7. Within this two-hour WDG, there would usually be time to explore two or three "presentations" (issues).
8. A combination of Heads of Year and Heads of Department.
9. In this programme, WDGs were offered approximately once per half term for two hours. Participants work in a range of schools and usually do not work directly with each other outside the WDG.
10. Aged 16-17 years.