Managing School Atmosphere Through Large Groups: A Five-Session Trial

Einar Gudmundsson, Gudrun B. Gudmundsdottir, Helgi G. Gardarsson & Helgi Grimsson

To cite this article: Einar Gudmundsson, Gudrun B. Gudmundsdottir, Helgi G. Gardarsson & Helgi Grimsson (2014) Managing School Atmosphere Through Large Groups: A Five-Session Trial, International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 64:4, 547-553, DOI: 10.1521/ijgp.2014.64.4.547

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1521/ijgp.2014.64.4.547

Published online: 25 Aug 2015.
Managing School Atmosphere Through Large Groups: A Five-Session Trial

EINAR GUDMUNDSSON, M.D.
GUDRUN B. GUDMUNSDOTTIR, M.D.
HELGI G. GARDARSSON, M.D.
HELGI GRIMSSON, M.A.

ABSTRACT

This paper describes an attempt to influence school atmosphere through a large group in an elementary school. Another goal was to increase the students’ feeling of responsibility for the school environment through training in democratic processes. A third goal was to explore how applicable the group dynamics of the large group are for 1st to 6th graders. Method: All students and school staff met in a weekly large group for five consecutive weeks. Results/conclusion: The level of participation steadily increased during the five sessions, and clearly 1st to 6th graders were able to make use of the large group method. Positive changes in school atmosphere occurred and may even have had a long-term effect. The understanding of democratic processes increased.

During the last decades, the concept of “the large group” has been fairly well established, especially within the group analytic tradition (Kreeger, 1975). Although the large group is essentially...
not a therapy group, it may deal with issues on a personal as well as a community level. More often than not, large groups have functioned as community meetings, and vice versa, since the large group method is inherently democratic in its nature. Usually the groups are experiential and there is a high level of freedom of speech, which can lead to powerful large groups or, in some cases, community meetings. Using the large group method in the school system has long been the interest of the authors, since we believe it may provide an excellent tool to manage, or improve, school atmosphere.

AIM OF THE TRIAL

1. To see if school atmosphere can be managed through the large group method applied in what officially is a community meeting.
2. To see if elementary school students are able to make use of the large group method.
3. To increase elementary school students’ ability to experience and comprehend democratic processes and the high level of freedom of speech inherent in the large group method.

METHOD

The chosen school was a new elementary school (Sjalands-skoli, Gardabaer, Iceland) in its first semester, with classes from first to sixth grades. The project’s official name was “Home Parliament,” which the school leadership hoped would create an exceptionally democratic school community meeting. The authors and group leaders, a female child psychiatrist and two male psychiatrists with backgrounds in group analysis, assisted the process, which was led by the principal. The intention was to let the meeting develop into an effective large group, allowing full freedom of speech, letting the group go where it wanted to go, encouraging group members to talk to the whole group and to each other, and allowing the group conductors’ role to slowly diminish and let the group flow by itself.

The meetings were Wednesday mornings, at the beginning of the school day, for 40 minutes, for a total of five sessions. All students, teachers, janitors, and the principal gathered in a large
group, a total of around 100 members. The group met in a rather small room, sitting in three circles. Because of a lack of chairs, the children brought in their own classroom chairs at the end of the previous day. Attendance was obligatory.

This elementary school starts each day with everyone singing two well-known songs. This was also done at the beginning of each session. Then there were short announcements by the principal. Teachers were asked beforehand to spread themselves out evenly in the group and to participate actively. Students with known behavior problems had their teacher sitting beside them, ready to help out in case. The teachers were instructed as to how to leave the group with minimal disturbance if it became necessary. To facilitate each session, two discussion themes were chosen to begin the session. These were likely to form a common ground for the students, such as, “What is it like to change to a new school?” and “What is it like to find friends at this school?” It was announced in the first meeting that there would be only five sessions, although the home parliament would continue in a somewhat different fashion.

RESULTS

At the first meeting, there was excitement and bewilderment. What was this all about? The introductory themes were helpful to get the discussion going, and the students soon started discussing the new school and comparing it to other schools they had been going to. During this session, the main theme became praising the teachers and the school, and expressing how positively they experienced the transition to this school. Although this was not planned, students quickly started raising their hands and waiting for a turn to speak, which put a lot of pressure on the group leaders to have an overview with so many hands in the air. The principal and teachers were active in keeping up with who was next in line. The group leaders knew no names, which slowed the process a little, but during the five sessions most of the students’ names became familiar. On the whole, the atmosphere was good at the end of the first meeting, although many had not spoken, which was not unexpected nor seen as a problem.
In the second meeting, the discussion moved from the first meeting’s praise of the school to what may be seen as a more exploratory and critical phase. Changes that needed to be made were discussed, but they were mostly of a practical nature, for example, changes in the schoolyard facilities. There was no real open criticism of the staff or the school. The discussion was more fluid, with increasing participation by students and teachers. Even the 1st graders were more active. In the second half of the session, these meetings were questioned, especially by the older students. What was the purpose of this? Some older students said it was boring, which created a lot of discussion, whereas many others said it was not boring. Those who were against these meetings were asked to raise their hands, and around two-thirds did. Around one-third wanted the meetings to continue. It was in this for-or-against spirit that the second meeting ended.

The third meeting started well, but relatively early on, one of the older students, who needed special attention, verbally attacked another older student. This started the latter crying, and he left his seat in the front row and went to the back of the room where a teacher took care of him. The group managed to contain, and work successfully through, the strong emotions that arose. The student under attack decided to go back to his front row seat and was able to talk about his experience. It turned out that he had been bullied for some time but did not report it. Many of the students, even the younger ones, seemed to know of this and expressed how they felt about it. The attacking student asked his forgiveness, which he got. This was a very powerful session, and there was great relief and a good feeling at the end of the meeting.

The fourth meeting started with more optimism; faith and trust in the group seemed to have increased considerably. Discussion about bullying was continued and some students told of their own experiences before entering this school. Also, openness and participation increased, and most students spoke in the group. A true working group was emerging.

The fifth and last meeting discussed the ending and the wish to continue. The group members were again asked to raise their hands and vote for or against the group. More than two-thirds wanted to continue, a considerable increase from the second
meeting. The group was quite active and lively till the end of the meeting.

Attendance was good throughout the meetings, and the possibility of leaving the group at will for bathroom breaks was kept open. On the whole, there were relatively few who left the group, and this did not disturb the group process.

The immediate effects of this group work in the school was more openness and participation in the school’s other meetings, as the students felt freer to express themselves. The school continues to gather in a community meeting (the home parliament), but now only once a month. These meetings are mostly used for practical decisions concerning school activities. The teachers frequently mention these meetings as the right forum for discussion when the staff has important matters to deal with.

The school atmosphere has steadily become more positive, open, and benign, with active, positive students and more content teachers, including the principal. A visit to the school after two and five years gave the impression that the school’s atmosphere was still positive, with a high degree of openness and well-being, although the size of the school and the number of students has grown considerably.

**DISCUSSION**

To make this trial possible, the school’s readiness to cooperate was crucial. This school was the second Icelandic elementary school the group leaders had approached. (At the first school, there was a last minute cancellation of the project, with minimal explanation.) The principal of the trial school was actively interested from the beginning and had his own plans for ongoing democratic school community meetings that he named “Home Parliament.” The weekly five-session trial became the start of the home parliament, which is still ongoing after five years, now on a monthly basis.

The group leaders had meetings with the school staff beforehand to explain the project and try to establish mutual trust. It seemed important to assure them that this was not group therapy, but rather group dynamics, as in a school community meeting. For further studies, it is important to have a tool to mea-
sure the school atmosphere before and after applying the large group method intervention, such as a “School Atmosphere Rating Scale.”

The size of this elementary school was ideal for a large group. Bigger schools would probably do well to divide into large groups of around 100 members each, and then maybe join all those groups together into one big “whole school community meeting” occasionally. In this way the students would be trained to work in very large groups, which would facilitate work in school community meetings. In even bigger schools, it might be wise to start with same age classes, like all 4th graders coming together in five meetings and later meeting with other grades or the rest of the school in five larger meetings. The authors see five as an advisable number of sessions to establish a working group. Also, it is the authors’ experience that an odd number is preferable for the group to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Of course, prolonging a group, or doing five sessions each semester, would probably increase the benefit for the school as a whole and the students individually. Ideally, the 1st graders would learn to work in small and large groups together, communicating and resolving important issues throughout their whole school period and hopefully into adult life.

The school’s likely long-term benefit would be a more positive, stimulating atmosphere with less aggression and bullying. The students’ personal benefit would be a deeper understanding of problem solving through dialogue. Also, a stronger feeling of unity may arise, a sense of “belonging” to the school community. Hopefully, this will also lead to a feeling of personal responsibility for the school community to function well. Deeper insight and understanding of other human beings is very likely to develop. Finally, it is important to learn that one’s voice in a large group matters, and that through this one may understand “freedom of expression” on a deeper level.

CONCLUSION

It is possible to influence a school’s atmosphere, through community meetings that use the large group as a model. As few as five sessions may have a long-term effect on the school’s atmo-
sphere. Elementary school students from 1st to 6th grade are able to make use of the large group method. Their ability to comprehend and use democratic methods is likely to increase, as well as their communication skills and openness. The implications for the future are promising. This project is a preliminary trial intended to pave the way for more systematic research. It is the hope of the authors that this work will stimulate other scientists to do a more systematic research into this area.

REFERENCES


_Einar Gudmundsson, M.D._

_Sunnuflot 20_

_210 Gardabaer_

_Iceland_

_E-mail: eingud@talnet.is or eingud@me.com_